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DISCOVERIES

Essays in Literary Criticism

by

JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY



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TO
K. M.
MY FELLOW-EXPLORER

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Introductory Note

I HAVE called these essays and lectures by a title that some people may think presumptuous : first, because it is the title of a book by Ben Jonson, and second, because it could be interpreted as meaning that I think there is something final in the results of these explorations of mine.

For the first, I believe the fine ghost of Ben Jonson will forgive me. For the second, I do not believe there is anything final in criticism. But I wanted my title to contain a suggestion of the curious elation which criticism sometimes brings to me. "To me," I insist, because I subscribe wholeheartedly to the famous dictum of Anatole France that criticism is the adventures of a man's soul among books. More and more criticism appears to me to be an intensely personal affair. Every honest critic—and by an honest critic I mean a man who builds his schemes and classifications solely on the basis of his own reactions—makes a great cross-section of the universe of literature in accordance with his temperament. What he is and believes is more surely reflected in his criticism than in his direct professions of faith. The more he can lose himself in the object, the more himself he is. And the excitement of losing oneself in exploration, the elation of being possessed by the very process of discovery, is the most

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precious thing I have found in criticism. Most of these essays and lectures are the records of what were, when I made them, not discoveries in any absolute sense, but simply discoveries for me.

Some of them appeared originally, in a slightly different form, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, others in *The Quarterly Review* and *The Yale Review*. The first two were lectures which, it seemed to me, would have gained nothing by being re-written as essays.

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AND now it seems to me intolerably presumptuous that I should have chosen this title for the little I have to say. I chose it in a moment of excitement when I was possessed by the curious exaltation that comes to a critic as he begins to disengage—as he believes—the central, golden thread of a poet's being. You know, of course you know, the small wise sentence of Anatole France to the effect that criticism is the confession of the adventures of a man's soul among books. The older I grow as a critic, the more essentially true does that sentence seem to be. Whether it is that I have some special liability to such adventures, or that my mind is such that the adventures I do have take a peculiarly exciting form—I cannot say ; but the fact is that there are moments when criticism of a particular kind, the only kind I care for, utterly absorbs me. I feel that I am touching a mystery. There is a wall, as it were, of dense, warm darkness before me—a darkness which is secretly alive and thrilling to the sense. This, I believe, is the reflection in myself of the darkness which broods over the poet's creative mind. It forms slowly and gradually gathers while I read his work. The sense of mystery deepens and deepens ; but the quality of the mystery becomes more plain. There is a moment when, as though unconsciously and out of my control, the deeper

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rhythm of a poet's work, the rise and fall of the great moods which determined what he was and what he wrote, enter into me also. I feel his presence ; I am obedient to it, and it seems to me as though the breathing of my spirit is at one with his.

These are vague words : I have none better to offer at this moment. But I believe that this condition I have so roughly described marks a crucial point in the process of understanding an author's work. In one sense it is then and then only that you *know* the work—in this sense you will never know it more ; it has now grown into your deepest life-experience, you have entered into a secret communion with a master-spirit, and a strange possession has been made yours for ever. But, in yet another sense, this is the moment at which you know the work least of all. For when apprehension is most direct, then is it most mysterious. Not in literature only, but in all things, throughout the universe of life of which literature is the symbol and the flower. In all things the directest and truest apprehension we have is a sudden communication, a sudden communion rather, between mystery and mystery. This is true of the attitude of the man of science towards the ultimate constituents of reality—there is in all great scientific discovery a sudden and unexpected accommodation of the mind to something which is by the process which brought the mind to that point, strictly unthinkable : there is a mysterious change in the very nature of thought in order that it may

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make a closer contact with the nature of reality. We may call it a sudden leap, a sideways leap—it is the prerogative of scientific genius. But in things simpler to understand and more common to the general experience, the same great process holds. The understanding between those who truly love each other is beyond the reach and scrutiny of their conscious intelligence. They love each other ; but they do not know why or how. The relation is at once too simple and too strange to be understood.

Of the same order is our knowledge of a work of literature. It is, when it is most perfect, a simple apprehension. It may have taken days, or months, or even years of labour to reach it ; a time during which we are held to our task by the fascination of a tale or the incidental beauties of its telling ; when we live, as it were, from hand to mouth, with an almost childish delight in the succession of sights and sounds unfolded before us. It is perhaps only an instinctive presentiment that there is more to come, or a dim awareness that there is a spiritual obligation upon ourselves to try to dominate a work which so obviously seems to dominate us, which keeps us reading and re-reading, ordering and arranging, half-consciously following half-apprehended clues, patiently yet almost blindly, until we have a sense of the whole work as the tangible garment of a living yet intangible spirit, just as beneath the stone drapery of one of those headless and heroic goddesses of Pheidias in the Louvre, after long and patient contemplation, we

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feel, we seem with our bodily eyes to see, the divine and hidden limbs subtly stirred by the breath of life. This is the moment of knowledge ; when all the words that a poet has spoken, all the characters that a novelist has created, appear to us as things-in-themselves no longer, but as the inevitable conditions, the necessary garment of invention through which a living yet secret reality was compelled to manifest itself in the material world. There comes a moment when we seem to break through these conditions to that which is beyond them ; we seem to make contact, immediate, full, and mysterious contact, with something for which we have no single word. We shall describe it, if we belong to that class of human beings which is driven to describe things in order to be able to evoke them by their names when the reality is departed, according to the context established beforehand by our habits of mind and soul —we shall call it God, or a deeper reality, or the music of the spheres, or the love that moves the sun and the other stars. I prefer, just at this moment, to call it a rhythm of life. For there is motion in it, there is growth, there is fullness, there is a downward plunging to darkness and an upward soaring to light ; it is a vital motion. In the greatest writers there is something grand and terrible in the sheer magnitude of this rhythmical upward and downward sweep of their secret path ; in the lesser it is constrained and circumscribed : but in all writers who can claim a permanent validity the governing rhythmical motion is there.

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There are great waves and little ones ; waves of the ocean, and waves of the land-locked sea.

An immediate contact with this motion as it governs a writer's work, a sense of it so close and so instinctive as to be wellnigh physical, as though the great wave had caught us away from our personal selves and bore us with it, part of its substance, in its thrilling and sickening rise and fall, is, I believe, the appointed utmost of our knowledge of a writer. Then we know him indeed with a knowledge that time cannot diminish ; we have lived with him, but with him impersonally, with what he was, not with what he appeared to be. All that we can do, if we are by nature fore-ordained to this form of wrestling with the ineffable, is to try to make partially explicit this knowledge that we have : to try, if we are critics, to show where the temporal garment is thinnest and sits closest to that which is beneath, to indicate the moments when the motion is most visible, to follow out in the very structure and detail of the work the secret pattern to which we have the key.

Moreover, I think that we are bound, are by our own nature compelled, to wrestle more and more with that which is greatest. After all, I believe that criticism is a personal affair, and that the less we critics try to disguise this from ourselves the better. On what excites and attracts and fascinates us in pursuit of our own completion, in obedience, if you like, to our own secret rhythm which we also must have if our work is to be vital at all—on that alone we shall have something to

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say worth hearing. If criticism is indeed, as I believe it is, the confession of a soul's adventures among masterpieces, then the greater the adventure, the greater the interest and value of the confession. A record of trivial encounters in books and in life, must become merely boring, if the recorder himself found them trivial. Perhaps the best critic is the one who finds no encounter trivial; I can admit it, and still be content to acknowledge that I am not of that kind. We are what we are, and though we come to the knowledge late, we come to it with relief, with something of the same audible relief with which Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* declared, *J'ai pris mon assiette*—"I have taken my stand." And we hear behind it the muttered implication : "I will no longer be bothered with that which does not interest me; I will no longer torment myself to be like other men."

This lecture is supposed to be about "The Nature of Poetry." You will say that it seems to be about anything else rather than that—about criticism, and statues in the Louvre, and queer, semi-mystical things called "rhythms of life." I admit it—at all events it is true so far—and it is true so far precisely because, when I re-read the substance of my lecture a little while ago, it seemed only too likely that you might think it true at the end. I began this introduction with the desire to apologise for any disappointment I might cause you; but it is only too plain to me now that my nature is incorrigible. Instead of making an

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apology for trying to blaze a sideways trail, I have merely been at the old game again : with the pleasant and paradoxical result that in comparison to this irrelevant preface, the substance it was designed to condone is almost relevant. I might as well have begun at the beginning, after all.

If I had, I should have said that I was sorry, but a lecture which I had firmly intended to be one on the Nature of Poetry had turned out to be a rather unorthodox speculation on the nature of Shakespeare's poetry. It was not exactly my fault : when my head is full of a certain kind of thoughts, I cannot turn them out to make room for others. You know the Latin line :

“Naturam expellas furca : tamen usque recurret.”

“ You may heave nature out with a pitchfork, but she'll be in again before you can say ‘ knife.’ ” Not otherwise with me ; and I feel that if I had offered to lecture on Keats, or Reparations, or the Fascist movement, it would have turned out to be the same old thing. Shakespeare would have been the burden of my song.

So that, compared to the enormity I might have committed, mine will be a venial offence. For, after all, Shakespeare is simply the greatest of all poets : and if it turns out that I have anything of import to say about the nature of his poetry, I shall in fact have said it about the nature of poetry in general.

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In a recent book of critical studies, Sir Henry Newbolt, casting about for the emotional cause of poetry, and the cause of its emotional effect upon ourselves, discovered it in the poet's longing and our own for "a land of heart's desire." Although we may at first feel that this conception is as romantic as its phrasing, yet if we have an eye to the reality beneath the words, and consider how much of memorable poetry seems to have been inspired by a longing for the things that are not, we may finally be surprised at the scope of Sir Henry's conjecture. Shelley was made for it, of course. What does Keats find in his Nightingale and his Grecian Urn but a voice and a symbol of a more perfect condition, far away from this world of time, "Here where men sit and hear each other groan." Wordsworth fits it well, with his—

Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realised.

And so, in our day, does Walter de la Mare, dreaming of the shadowless asphodel of a kingdom where neither moth nor mortality doth corrupt. But even poets much less averse than these to accepting their fate as sons of earth reveal in their songs a longing for the things that are not. Catullus's "*Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus,*"—"My Lesbia, let us live and love"—was once perhaps a poem of triumphant love, and it may be only our knowledge of the bitter sequel which makes us read it as a pathetic prayer for security

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in a passion where no security is. But we do read it so. Love poets are but seldom the singers of happiness in love ; and the greatest love-poet of our own times, Thomas Hardy, has given an expression that is immortal to the intolerable anguish of desiderium.

With some good show of reason we may say, therefore, that the characteristic emotion of poetry is a longing for the things that are not, for permanence amid change, for security in unrest—"this evermore unrest," as Shakespeare called it—for eternity amid mortality. And this emotion is not peculiar to the romantic modern soul ; it exists in classical poetry as well as in our own. It is in Homer, it is in Virgil, in Aeschylus and Euripides and Theocritus ; and nearer poets have perhaps done no more than make the longing more conscious and give it a more definitely subjective expression. "Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art !" is only a more personal statement of a theme that is truly secular to poetry. It seems to have been more natural to the poets of old to voice their longings through the creatures of a created world. So that Aristotle, looking upon their practice, could define poetry in terms that seem to us strange, as an "imitation of emotions and actions." At first there seems to be an unbridgable chasm between this definition and Sir Henry Newbolt's description ; but the gulf narrows the more steadily we look into it. The Greek saw chiefly the thing that is made ; the modern sees chiefly the temper that goes to making it. And the gulf is bridged altogether by

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that English thinker who stands midway between the old world and the new. The poet, says Francis Bacon, " submits the shadows of things to the desires of the mind;" and again, " the use of poetry hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it."

The one of Bacon's sentences explains the fascination which poetry exerts upon us ; the other describes the poet's activity. The poet does not merely give utterance to a desire for the things that are not, " he submits the shadows of things " to that desire. There is implicit in the brief sentence a precious distinction between the methods, and perhaps between the values, of lyrical and dramatic poetry, which is more often felt than formulated. And perhaps something more valuable still is concealed within it. Granted that we feel there is in Bacon's phrase a peculiar appropriateness to our own instinctive surmise of the nature of poetry, suppose we were to attempt to apply it. We should distinguish between the poetry of Shakespeare and Shelley somewhat after this manner. Shakespeare, far more than Shelley, actually does submit the shadows of things to the desires of the mind. There is an objectivity, a substantiality, in Shakespeare that Shelley did not achieve. And, again, while we are conscious in both of " the desire of the mind," in Shelley it appears much more as a desire perpetually unsatisfied, even as a desire by nature incapable of any satisfaction, " the desire of the moth for the star."

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We realise the difference most clearly if we consider the one sole poem in which Shakespeare's inspiration seems strangely akin to Shelley's. *The Phœnix and the Turtle* is platonic and mystical ; it can be compared to Shelley's *Sensitive Plant*. The only reason why we do not think immediately of Shelley when we read it is that, in spite of all apparent similarity of conception, the quality of Shakespeare's poem is absolutely different from that of anything Shelley wrote. Shakespeare is secure and serene ; in his poem we can detect no tremor of the agitation by which Shelley is incessantly disturbed. *The Phœnix and the Turtle* is mysterious, but it is crystal-clear. We can express the difference only by saying that what Shelley longed for, Shakespeare at that moment possessed.

It would not be easy to say with confidence what *The Phœnix and the Turtle* is about. On the face of it, it is a requiem over the death of a phœnix and a turtle-dove, who are the symbols of a love made perfect by refinement from all earthly passion and become virginal. There is surely no more astonishing description of the highest attainable by human love.

Hearts remote, yet not asunder ;
Distance, and no space was seen
'Twixt the turtle and his queen.
But in them, it were a wonder.

But the poem floats high above the plane of intellectual apprehension : what we understand is only a poor simulacrum of what we feel—feel with

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some element of our being which chafes in silence against the bars of sense. And in the poet's own imagination it is Reason itself which makes and chants the dirge, Reason baffled by the sight of perfect individuality in perfect union.

Reason, in itself confounded,
Saw division grow together,
To themselves yet either neither,
Simple were so well compounded.

That it cried : How true a twain
Seemeth this concordant one !
Love hath reason, reason none
If what parts can so remain.

Whereupon it made this threne
To the phœnix and the dove,
Co-supremes and stars of love,
As chorus to their tragic scene.

Beauty, truth and rarity,
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclosed in cinders lie.

Death is now the phœnix' nest ;
And the turtle's loyal breast
To eternity doth rest,

Leaving no posterity :
'Twas not their infirmity,
It was married chastity.

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Truth may seem, but cannot be ;
Beauty brag, but 'tis not she
Truth and beauty buried be.

To this urn let those repair
That are either true or fair ;
For these dead birds sigh a prayer. ,

And we feel, in some inexplicable sense, that the poet's claim that Reason bows its head in this poem is a true one. There is an absolute harmony in *The Phœnix and the Turtle* which can easily appear to our heightened awareness as the necessary gesture of Reason's deliberate homage to a higher power. Through it we have a glimpse of a mode of experience wholly beyond our own, and touch the finality of a consummation. This veritably, we might say if we had the courage of our imaginations, is the music of the spheres ; this is indeed the hymn of that celestial love which "moves the sun and the other stars."

For reasons which evade expression in ordinary speech, *The Phœnix and the Turtle* is the most perfect short poem in any language. It is *pure* poetry in the loftiest and most abstract meaning of the words : that is to say, it gives us the highest experience which it is possible for poetry to give, and it gives it without intermission. Here for once, it seems, Shakespeare had direct command over an essential source of inspiration ; here he surrendered himself completely to a kind of experience, and to the task of communicating a kind

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of experience, which elsewhere he conveys to us only through "the shadows of things"; for a moment he reveals himself as an inhabitant of a strange kingdom wherein he moves serene and with mastery. Beside the unearthly purity, the unfaltering calm of this poem, even the most wonderful poetry of his dramas can sometimes appear to us as "stained with mortality." This is the harmony of which broken and tumultuous echoes accompany the destinies of his heroes; this is the knowledge of which the memory haunted Macbeth—or Macbeth's creator—when he cried:

She should have died hereafter.
To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

There speaks a despair beyond Macbeth's; it comes like a moan of wild and superhuman music into the play, a divine visitation. It is a despair beyond Macbeth's, for it is not the despair of crime, but of mortality; not of a murderer, but a victim; and it could have come even more truly from the greatest and noblest spirit in the world.

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There is a potent reason, therefore, other than our own instinct, for regarding these lines of Macbeth's as expressing with a peculiar intimacy Shakespeare's own thought and emotion. They overcharge the play, and are too powerful for the character or the situation to bear ; they do not contain the mood or the thought or the vision of thwarted ambition or detected murder ; they do not belong to Macbeth, therefore we must believe that they do belong to Shakespeare. And we have an exactly similar sense of emotional disproportion when we read the no less famous passage from *The Tempest* :

And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like an unsubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a wrack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.—Sir, I am vexed;
Bear with my weakness : my old brain is troubled.

As in *Macbeth*, it is the sheer magnificence of the lines alone which prevents us from seeing them as dramatically inappropriate. We feel, and perhaps rightly feel, that poetry so splendid can never be wrong. After all, if an archangel should interpose in a mortal argument, we should scarcely charge him with irrelevance. Nevertheless, these lines of Prospero's are dramatically irrelevant. They are

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unexpected and unprepared-for ;¹ and in order to value them at their true worth we must allow full weight to the fact that Shakespeare quite deliberately represents Prospero's vision of the unsubstantiality of the world as due to a disturbance of his mind. Prospero has had a sudden fit of anger against Caliban. Ferdinand, looking upon him, sees vaguely that "some passion works him strongly"; Miranda, who knows her father better, declares that :

Never till this day
Saw I him touched with anger so distempered.

But she is mistaken. There is no anger in the vision; it is resigned and serene, yet with the suddenness of a flash of piercing insight and all the tumultuous agitation of "a beating mind." Even more definitely than before we have a warrant for regarding these lines as belonging more nearly to Shakespeare himself than to the character who speaks them.

The lines from *The Tempest* are strangely similar to those from *Macbeth*: similar first in that both alike belong to what we may call the "superhuman" poetry of Shakespeare, of which the effect so greatly eludes our analysis and the felt meaning so far exceeds the meaning understood, that in order to describe it at all we are driven even against our will into semi-mystical metaphor; and still more strikingly similar in that the sentiment in both passages is almost the same. In both the poet

¹ And, with all deference to Mr. A. C. Bradley, unexplained.

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suddenly sees the insignificance of human life and cries,

There's nothing serious in mortality.

But there is a difference between them. Whereas in *Macbeth* he is angry, embittered, indignant and contemptuous, and speaks with the gall of a man writhing with self-loathing for having been the victim of a long deception, in *The Tempest* the voice is quiet with resignation. Between the two kindred passages there is the great gulf which lies between rebellion and acceptance.

Let us leave these clues for a moment, to turn to another kind of passages in Shakespeare's poetry which constantly exert the same hyperdramatic power ; passages in which he seems most constantly to be impelled by some force of his nature to express thoughts and feelings beyond those which the dramatic situation demands. No poet in the world has dealt so vividly, so lovingly, and so strangely with death as Shakespeare. It is, of course, inevitable that any tragic poet should be largely concerned with death ; yet Shakespeare's reaction to the thought of death seems to be wholly different from that of any other tragic poet ; it is a reaction quite peculiar to himself, and so evidently beyond his conscious control that it appears with the same elemental force in an attempt at comedy like *Measure for Measure* as in the tragedies proper. Claudio betrays, at the prospect of death, the same queer mixture of horror and fascination as Hamlet himself. Shakespeare, we may say, longs for

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finality in death ; and he passes from a condition of doubt to a condition of assurance of that finality. As he grows surer, death becomes to him more and more a triumph over life, not at all, or to be accurate, not at all obviously, in the Christian sense of "*mors janua vitæ*," because "death is the gate of life ;" but by virtue of its mere cessation : it has for him a meaning of which an echo has escaped into Sir Walter Raleigh's phrase : "O just, eloquent and mighty death ! " The thought of death as a period to mortality fills him with an exultation which finds its most characteristic utterance in Cleopatra's

It is great
To do that thing which ends all other deeds,
Which shackles accidents and bolts up change,
Which sleeps and never palates more the dug,
The beggar's nurse and Cæsar's.

And from Shakespeare's middle period onwards the imagination of the death-bed as the marriage-bed continually recurs. Man, the bridegroom, "will encounter darkness as a bride." "I will be," says Antony,

A bridegroom in my death, and run into't
As to a lover's bed.

"The stroke of death," says Cleopatra, "is as a lover's pinch That hurts and is desired." And to those who object that we are imputing to Shakespeare himself sentiments which belong to the

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characters of his drama, we shall reply that the fact that these sentiments invariably surge up through the smallest chink of opportunity proves that they are due not to the exigencies of the creation, but to the habit of mind of the creator ; and we shall also reply that when, as at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's obvious effort was to lift his characters up to a pinnacle of truth and nobility, these were the thoughts and feelings with which he naturally endowed them : and further, that those passages of his poetry which awaken the deepest and most disturbing echoes we are compelled by an instinct to reckon peculiarly his own.

The strange thing about these characteristic utterances of Shakespeare is their compulsive power. We may ascribe this to their extreme beauty : but that is only to solve a mystery by a word, and we are left with the same question in another form : "Why are these utterances so mysteriously beautiful ?" A vision of the insignificance of this life may indeed be the occasion of beautiful poetry ; but the poetry we expect from it is sombre and sad. These utterances of Shakespeare are neither the one nor the other. Even when, as in *Macbeth*, there is anger and contempt in the rejection of life, there is exaltation also : we are not cast down, but uplifted by them. It is hard to translate a feeling so mysterious into words without playing it false, but we might attempt to render our reaction to these passages of Shakespeare by saying that we feel that his rejection, even when angry and indignant, is not negative

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but positive : he rejects this life because he knows of something better and truer, even though the knowledge be against his will. When he has pronounced that life is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing,” he is not left, as other men would be, naked to the cold wind of eternity. He has some secret knowledge of which he cannot be dispossessed, and of which he cannot dispossess himself ; he has a memory of some kind of experience beside which the actual experience of life is indeed trivial. He had been too deeply in love with life to deny it easily, and he was condemned—throughout what is called his “tragic period”—to hover between rejection and acceptance of an experience which transcended it. It is true that he is, in a sense, the most human of all our poets ; but he is also the strangest : and it is a mistake in proportion to minimise the strangeness and exaggerate the ordinary in him.

What, then, if we were to resign ourselves to a mysterious explanation of what is mysterious, and to suppose that Shakespeare had access to a plane of experience beyond our own, and that he had apprehended as realities a truth, a harmony and a love—apprehended them as one and not as three—which are not to be found on earth, and are not to be fully expressed in terms of earthly happenings ? This apprehension in all its purity we should regard as fixed in *The Phænix and the Turtle*, where it appears (for causes which we may look for, if we will, in what little we know of Shakespeare’s life) as a symbolic vision of perfect and celestial love,

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through which “the white radiance of eternity” shines without spot. By what stress of soul Shakespeare attained to this experience we do not know : we can only guess. But after this experience, which was valid only so long as it lasted, he was bewildered. Having seen something beyond the world, he was bewildered in the world. We can explain the preoccupation with death which entered into his work with the plays of the *Hamlet* period—*Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* followed immediately after *The Phœnix and the Turtle*—and we can explain the apparent cynicism with which they are pervaded by appealing to the actual experience which is recorded in the Sonnets : what we cannot explain in such terms is the strange quality of this preoccupation with death, the sudden extension of his poetic range, and his production of effects which we most naturally describe as superhuman : his command, let us say, of a new majestic and unearthly music. From this time onward Shakespeare rejects life ; and he never accepts it again. It is true that there is something which is often described as “serenity” in his latest romantic plays, culminating in *The Tempest*, but to insist on this quality, indeed to describe it by such a word, is to exaggerate it and to distort the total effect of Shakespeare’s work. For the “serenity” of the final period is not of the same order as the tumult and despair of the great tragedies. The acceptance that is in them is not an acceptance of life ; it is something quite different, it is an acceptance of his own rejection

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of life. He is no longer rebellious against the discrepancy, the utter hostility between the thing he knows and the thing which is. He has tried to reconcile them. Shakespeare's tragedies are essentially nothing but the repeated attempt to express his knowledge in terms of this world ; that is why they are terrible and moving as no other tragedies, not even the greatest, have been. We feel within them an overstraining of the human soul. Not for nothing does madness and hallucination count for so much in their structure. Shakespeare is torn asunder by the effort to express a perception which is not of this world in terms of events and characters which are. They derive their mysterious potency from the double tragedy of which they are the record : the tragedy of the characters, and the tragedy of Shakespeare who invented them in vain—in vain, not for our purposes, but for his own intentions. And, in spite of the magnificent triumphs he was to achieve, in spite of the incomparable victory which is represented by *King Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra* in the kingdom of art, Shakespeare's great tragic period ends in failure for himself. He has attempted the impossible; he has come nearer to achieving it than any other human being we know. But the impossible remains the impossible, and Shakespeare fails.

Perhaps you will understand from this brief indication what I mean when I say that the so-called " serenity " of the final period is not of the same order as the tumult and despair of the tragedies. The acceptance that is in them is not an acceptance

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of human destinies, but of the fact that human destinies are incommensurable with the experience that is beyond them. There is a tremendous difference : all the difference between winning a victory and accepting the necessity of defeat. *The Tempest* is no answer to *Macbeth* or *King Lear*; it is rather a turning aside from, an avoidance of, their problems, a giving up of the attempt at victory. And, as we have seen, the most moving passage of *The Tempest* stands clean outside the dramatic argument, and is the most personal and the most resigned of all Shakespeare's many variations on the theme : "There's nothing serious in mortality." What is, I believe, of far more moment in Shakespeare's final period than any apparent "serenity," is, first, his general listlessness, his manifest lack of interest in what he was writing, and, second, his constant awakening out of this indifference to portray an ideal of youthful love, of youth itself, which fascinates him. His Perdita, his Marina, his Miranda, his Florizel, his Imogen, represent something more than a new fashion in romance. I should say that their creator was trying to embody in these youthful lovers, striving to make real to himself, an imagination that a new race of beings might be born for whom the knowledge and the love expressed in *The Phænix and the Turtle* might be not a metaphysical but an actual and lived reality. They represent a final attempt to solve the problem by conceiving a generation for whose consciousness the problem shall no longer exist.

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The beginning of the *Hamlet* period, I have said, marks Shakespeare's rejection of life. This rejection of life is maintained to the end ; it is voiced by Prospero at the last as well as Hamlet or Macbeth or Cleopatra, and in language as compulsive as theirs. What governs the subtle and various modulations of mood which so deeply colour Shakespeare's plays when the early period of confidence is past is not the attitude of rejection itself, but the varying emotion with which the attitude is held. In the *Hamlet* plays, the emotion is bewilderment, as it were, at the absolute incompatibility, the sheer hostility between one life, one mode of experience, and the other, and at Shakespeare's knowledge that he himself belonged to both. On the one side, the perfect, virginal and suprasensual love of *The Phœnix and the Turtle*, on the other the sheer luxuriance of the sensual riot in *Measure for Measure*. In *Hamlet*, the crimes and disgusts of this world tearing to pieces a soul whose affinity is with the other. In *Macbeth* the emotion is blank and deadly despair, "irrecoverably dark, total eclipse," but the despair is thrilled and made more dark by tremors of another experience. *Macbeth* is Satanic ; the work of a Lucifer who has "seen some majesty" and is tortured by the memory of it. A black ninth wave of loathing for human destinies surges through the play. In *King Lear*, tremendous and awful tragedy though it is, the black despair is lightened. In no other play is the purely superhuman note more miraculously sounded ; and it is surely no

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accident that Shakespeare uttered it through the lips of "a foolish, fond old man," who wanders, driven by the malignant cruelty of evil, beyond the confines of reason. In this, one of the two greatest of Shakespeare's plays, we feel that he communicated more of his secret knowledge through human symbols than elsewhere in his work, and that he forced the capacities of the poetry which is "an imitation of emotions and actions" to their breaking-point. Through the fury of the elements and the fiercer fury of evil souls we hear a divine music, an assurance of that which can be only by virtue of the forces which seem to deny it. As far as we can assign a spirit which shines through the whole of *King Lear* to any particular part of it, it seems to radiate most intensely from the figure of Cordelia. The angry and gusty fire of Kent's loyalty burns in Cordelia to a pure essential flame, the utmost sublunary destinies can carry of the more perfect fidelity which Shakespeare had apprehended. In the final act, and by reason of the mutual disaster which is to engulf them, Lear and Cordelia are lifted up into the condition of *The Phænix and the Turtle*. Lear's very words : "We two will sing alone like birds i' the cage," contain a trembling mortal echo of their song, and Reason might chant over Cordelia the dirge it chanted over them :

Beauty, truth and rarity,
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclosed in cinders lie.

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Death is now the phœnix' nest,
And the turtle's loyal breast
To eternity doth rest.

Loyalty, I believe, became for Shakespeare more and more exclusively the earthly symbol of his highest experience. It seemed to him that this relation between human beings could express, with least distortion, an image of another relation that he knew ; this relation, more than any other, seemed to vindicate the existence of some connection between the world of his apprehension and the world of human life. And the diffusion of the radiance of loyalty through *King Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra* sets these two plays apart as the pinnacle of his expression in literature. They mark his greatest triumph as an artist, for the artist is the man who communicates his intuitions of an ultimate reality, intuitions which have in themselves no shape or form or likeness, through symbols chosen in the world of common experience : he clothes his knowledge in the garment of invention. *Antony and Cleopatra* is Shakespeare's triumph as the artist. Waste after waste in *Antony and Cleopatra* finds its justification, is somehow redeemed and explained, by loyalty after loyalty. Enobarbus, Eros, Antony, the great Queen herself, Charmian and Iras, one after another make the sacrifice, as though all the fidelity of which the human spirit had ever been capable were crowded in a magnificent crescendo into this single story. In no other work of literature that

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I know does the spectacle of constant disaster make me conscious of such a profundity of calm ; and in no other play of Shakespeare's is death so constantly presented as a sweet and longed-for sleep. Hamlet's torturing thought of the dreams that may trouble the sleep of death returns no more ; there is no railing against life, like Macbeth's, but a tranquil acceptance of its end. The two great characters speak in instinctive harmony at their taking-off. Antony's

Unarm, Eros, the long day's task is done
And we must sleep—

And Cleopatra's

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast
That sucks the nurse asleep

chime together on the full note of the play, and it is there so amply sounded that even Prospero's words, for all their beauty, are no more than a twilight echo of a midday plenitude.

In so far as we may speak at all of problems and solutions in Shakespeare's mind, it is not *The Tempest* which resolves the knots of the tragedies, but rather *Antony and Cleopatra*, for *Antony and Cleopatra* does seem to answer questions of the real world, as it were, in terms of the real world : which *The Tempest* does not. And yet, of course, this answer is no answer. Loyalty and sacrifice, suffering and disaster and death, may indeed be the conditions under which the human spirit comes nearest to manifesting its kinship with a more

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mysterious reality; but it remains the old paradox which has haunted men through a whole epoch of the world's consciousness. Ever since Christ came on earth, speaking strange words, the greatest human minds have moved in obedience to their rhythm. True life can only be won by the sacrifice of life—"He that loseth his life shall save it." The appointed end of a perfect human love is death. "Greater love hath no *man* than this that he lay down his life for a friend." And Christ's own crucifixion is the archetype of all Shakespeare's tragedy. The purest reality, the purest beauty, the purest love, cannot, by its own nature, manifest itself here on earth without disaster; but in disaster it can. Just as Christ's earthly defeat is His triumph, so the death of Cordelia and Cleopatra is their victory. The paradox remains, but it is a paradox which, in some secret chamber of our being, we understand.

I hate, in speaking of Shakespeare, to talk of problems and solutions. You cannot apprehend a living mind by such rigid methods. But we have to expect that our vocabulary should be weak and uncertain and approximate when we are dealing with suprasensual things. We have to reconcile ourselves to the knowledge that in whatever terms we talk of the essential Shakespeare, we shall

Do it wrong, being so majestical
To offer it the show of violence.

But, indeed, instead of talking of problems and solutions, it would be nearer the truth to say that *King Lear* and, even more immediately, *Antony*

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and Cleopatra, themselves compose the tumults they awaken. The security of a purer experience illuminates and calms the riot of mortal issues. In them the magic of Shakespeare's poetry touches its zenith, being constantly quickened by an apprehension of a reality which transcends and informs it—a mysterious effect of surpassing genius by which the characters seem ultimately to be governed in their act by the beauty which is manifested in their speech : their lips at last merely utter the cadence of their deeds. When "the god Hercules whom Antony loved" forsakes him to the sound of music under the earth, a more potent music enters into possession of his soul and leads him unerring to his destiny.

Than this achievement poetry can go no higher. For remember, the word of Aristotle, though it is not the whole truth, is true. Poetry is "an imitation of emotions and actions." Only because it is that can it make its universal and permanent appeal. The world of the poet must be a continuation of the world of ordinary human experience. But that is not all. Poetry is also "a submission of the shadows of things to the desires of the mind." This "imitation of emotions and actions" is only a means by which the profounder intuitions of the poet can be realised and made communicable. And in this description of Shakespeare that I have attempted, I have tried to show how, in the greatest of all poets, this twofold process was accomplished.

Moreover, I believe, and perhaps you will have gathered why I believe it, that precisely because

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Shakespeare was the greatest of all poets, he accepted his own essential and inevitable failure. Because his intuition into reality was deepest, his was the deepest consciousness of the impossibility of ever fully and truly manifesting it through "the imitation of emotions and actions." No man has ever done that ; if ever it can be done, the world and the human mind will be changed. And this, and nothing else, I believe, is what Shakespeare is saying when he has given up the struggle with the impossible. His Perdita, his Miranda, his Marina, these new-born creatures who look on the world with a new vision and cry, like Miranda,

O brave new world
That has such creatures in it !

are merely the form of speech with which the great poet utters the truth of the great prophet : " Except ye be born again ye can in no wise enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." And, further, I believe that it was because Shakespeare also had, by his own way, attained to that knowledge that he cared not at all what happened to his great work, and it was left to the pious offices of two fellow actors to save the most magnificent poetry of the world from oblivion.

Poetry is relative ; but the intuition and the knowledge from which poetry is born is absolute. And there is no reconciling them ; the greatest poetry is a compromise. And Shakespeare had reached a point where compromise and the effort of compromise had no more interest for him. He

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was, in a sense, the ideal poet, and he reached an ideal conclusion : the more we understand him, the more we can understand the essential laws of poetic genius, and the nature of poetry itself.

Poetry, I have said, is relative : in order to be universal and comprehensible it must be. But there is a poetry that may almost be called absolute. *The Phœnix and the Turtle* belongs to this kind of poetry. It is the direct embodiment, through symbols which are necessarily dark, of a pure, comprehensive and self-satisfying experience, which we may call, if we please, an immediate intuition into the hidden nature of things. It is inevitable that such poetry should be obscure, mystical, and strictly unintelligible : it is too abstract for our comprehension, too essential, too little mediated. There is not much poetry of this kind ; because it is too personal and too esoteric to gain the general ear. And it necessarily hovers between the condition of being the highest poetry of all and not being poetry at all. But, wherever in the scale we place it, it gives us a clue to the nature of poetry itself. For relative poetry—which is practically the whole of what we call poetry—is born of the adjustment of the human soul to the knowledge and memory of such an experience. It comes of the effort to communicate this knowledge through a world of symbols ; and the highest among this relative poetry is that in which the symbols chosen from the world of our human experience are most completely saturated with the quality of this intuition.

I do not mean that all poets conform to the type

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of Shakespeare : after all, he is too great to be used as a standard. A smaller poet may have neither the power of direct intuition, nor the genius to create a whole world through which to express it. He may be chained to the world of the particular ; certain things may move him strangely, and the emotion they arouse in him may pour over into his description of them. Then they also become symbols of an intuition which sees beyond the object into a deeper reality. What I say is this : that, although, speaking strictly, there is no poet like Shakespeare, to every true poet, whether great or small, the process which was so tremendously exemplified in Shakespeare *must* occur in some degree. You must not hope to find in all poets the same terribly complex process of adjustment : in Keats, who was a great poet, it is ever so much simpler to understand : in Wordsworth, the whole movement of his mind is almost transparent. In smaller poets, if they are *true* poets, the effort of understanding their rhythm and scope is simpler still. But these all belong essentially to the same kind of men, and their poetry to the same kind of poetry. Shakespeare is only the greatest and most mysterious of all. If we understand him, we can understand all poetry. And I feel that it was at any rate a right instinct which impelled me to devote this lecture to a consideration of him alone. The nature of Shakespeare's poetry is the nature of poetry. I wonder whether I have persuaded you that this is so.

[September, 1922.]

*The Significance of
Russian Literature*

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SIGNIFICANCE is an imposing word, it is also a vague one. It may mean importance, it may mean merely meaning : probably it is most at home, and therefore most serviceable, when it stands for something between the two. Let us say, then, that significance is important meaning, and that in trying to discuss the significance of Russian literature, we are trying to elucidate the meaning it has which is of importance to ourselves.

And here again, we may easily be vague. Ourselves are fluctuating, nebulous things at best. And even when we compel them to a shape, the shape has many facets. I, for instance, am a man and also a writer; and Russian literature has an important meaning for me in both these capacities. It has taught me as a writer that the conception of "art" which still dominated English literature when I commenced apprentice, is founded on a quite modern and one-sided emphasis on a single, formal element in literature: an exaltation of what Pater called the qualities of mind at the cost of what he thought the more precious qualities of soul. In other words, Russian literature has a quite peculiar significance in the purely literary evolution of modern times. It has done more than any other single influence to diminish the prestige of the French conception of literary art.

That is, without doubt, an important meaning

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of Russian literature, but the importance is a special one. If we were to analyse it, we should probably find that it was only an outward visible sign of a significance of another kind. Nevertheless, it exists in and for itself. What we may call, in the widest sense, the technical influence of Russian literature has been already considerable, and is only beginning.

But the significance of Russian literature, as I understand it, is far greater, far more direct, and far simpler than that. The selves for which it has importance are the simplest, most naked, and most essential selves,—those elements in our nature, let us say, though it is rather unfashionable, which desire before all things to be good.

Russian literature is absolutely permeated, saturated through and through, with a sense of the problem of conduct. Not merely the great writers have this problem for ever fermenting in their minds, but the smaller ones also. It not only directs the creative impulse in a Tolstoy and a Dostoevsky, but in a Gogol and a Tchekhov also. Now perhaps it might be said that this in itself is nothing new, though I believe that the concentration of the whole force of a literature on such a problem is very new. But what is undoubtedly new is the directness with which the Russian writers naturally approach the problem.

The problem they are tormented by is the problem of conduct : the question that is always present to their mind is : How shall we live ? and the spirit in which they approach it is one that

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can only be described as a spirit of complete loyalty to humanity. By that I mean that the Russian writer holds it instinctively as an axiom that a way of life to be truly satisfying must be based on a harmony of the human faculties. Heart and mind must be at one. There must be no piece-meal realisations. If the claims of the moral nature of man are in conflict with the claims of his intellectual nature, then the house is divided against itself and must fall. What is good, says the Russian, must be true.

In essence, I suppose, this is the Greek attitude. But the mere thought of comparing the Greek attitude with the Russian seems fantastic. Not perhaps because the attitudes themselves are so profoundly different, as because the vehemence with which they are held is. There is also another reason for the obvious unlikeness : but of that later. The first is a difference of vehemence. No doubt some of the causes of this lie deep within the Russian temperament ; but one, at least, we English are well fitted to appreciate. The Russian has been always denied the proper political satisfaction of man. The Greeks had that : we have that : the Russians never. Now there are two principal gains to be had from the natural exercise of political activity. One is the absorption of a great deal of spiritual energy which has to find an outlet somewhere : the other the habit of compromise, the practical sense of allowances to be made, not so much for other human beings as for life itself : the instinctive knowledge that life

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cannot be perfect, that it can be, at the very best, only an approximation to the heart's desire : that it is an oddly imperfect mixture, and that we have to accept its imperfection.

The Russian, on the contrary, had a vast amount of spiritual energy not thus employed, and he was not compelled by the inherited wisdom of centuries of experience to acquiesce in the imperfection of life. He employed his energies in scrutinising it passionately, passionately yet in a sense abstractly, in the tiniest detail yet speculatively. The mere fact that he could not touch the pattern made him the more convinced that it ought to be perfect.

I do not wish to lay too much stress on this contrast. It is important, I believe; but I also suspect that in regarding this peculiarity of the Russian spirit as the consequence of its political history we may be taking for a cause what is really an effect. What seems to us, as Englishmen, a failure in the Russian to evolve a political system which could satisfy his energies, may not be a failure at all. It may simply be that the Russian is not deeply interested in the kind of life which we regard as natural to man. We have, for example, to reckon with the fact that so many great Russian writers either made their peace with the autocracy or declared themselves indifferent to political reform as a thing of no spiritual consequence. For the moment, we may take our choice : either the peculiar intensity of spirit which finds expression in Russian literature is the consequence of the denial of normal political

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satisfactions, or the cause of their absence. The old autocracy, and the inverted autocracy which has now taken its place, may be symptoms rather than causes of a spiritual state which is strange to us.

The strange spiritual atmosphere is there : and we must try to define it further. Perhaps we can get nearer to it by considering another paradoxical element in Russian literature. The most casual student of Russian literature during the nineteenth century—and one great fact about it is that it *all* belongs to the nineteenth century—is struck by the immense contrast between the creative literature and the criticism. The criticism, even of men like Bielinsky and Mihailovsky, seems oddly inadequate to the literature : they seem so different as to be almost incommensurable. The Russian critic is for ever judging an author by the political views he expresses, or—this seems to be the most fearful crime of all—by the political views he omits to express. This is, if we reflect, intelligible enough. Under the censorship of the autocracy it was inevitable that literature should have to carry the weight of meanings and interpretations which are primarily political : it was the only medium of expression. A book by a great writer was a political utterance : and if there was a studied absence of political intention in it, it was (and perhaps more fundamentally) still a political utterance. We can understand the phenomenon. But what makes it more interesting is that the Russian writers themselves accepted criticism of this kind : they

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regarded it as natural, and—still more remarkable—when they turned their hands to criticism themselves, it was criticism of this kind that they wrote. If you have read Dostoevsky's novels, and you have also read *The Journal of an Author*, the regular periodical criticism which he wrote during the last established years of his life; you will surely have been struck by the strange discrepancy between them. Here is an author of novels which for sheer psychological subtlety have never been surpassed, writing criticism that is a compound of elementary ethics and visionary politics, in the intervals of composing *The Brothers Karamazov*. And there is the same paradox to be seen in Tolstoy.

This appears a paradox to us, and I puzzled over it a long while ; I forgot to take into account the position of the observer. I forgot I was an Englishman with a natural habit of looking upon politics and, in a way, upon ethics also, as practical affairs. I forgot that separation between the practical and the contemplative which is the source of our political strength. Suddenly it dawned on me that for the Russian mind this separation did not exist : that for it the temporal government of man was really only a symbol or parable of the spiritual, and—if I may be forgiven an imaginative flight into history—that Holy Russia was really the modern embodiment of that strange, half-real, half-legendary institution after which our imaginations grope through the mists of the Dark Ages, the Holy Roman Empire, into which Charlemagne

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was inducted long centuries ago by Pope Hadrian. Then also the division between the temporal and the spiritual did not exist : then also the political unity of mankind seemed a necessary conception simply because all men had immortal souls, because they were brethren in Christ, and on earth must be the equal children of the two great vicegerents of God.

That, some may say, is a mediæval conception. It is : but it is not less sublime for that. The Holy Roman Empire, as the mediæval mind conceived it, lasted but a little while : the Holy Russian Empire has lasted but a little while. I do not want to point the parallel between them, but only to suggest that by imagining the Holy Russia of the nineteenth century as in some sort a recurrence of the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne, by realising that their strangeness is in some essential qualities deeply similar, we can perhaps more easily appreciate the peculiarities and importance of the Russian spirit and the literature in which it is expressed.

For one thing, the closeness of the correspondence which was in the time of Charlemagne's empire expected between the spiritual and the temporal condition of man, is disconcerting to us. We separate them utterly ; whole periods of our history have been engrossed in divorcing them ; religion, we say, is a man's private concern. No doubt that is a valuable practical lesson we have learned ; how valuable we may guess from the fact that the rest of the world has come to us for it.

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But the point is that it is only a practical approximation. Religion is not altogether a man's private affair, if one religion enjoins upon him the duty of brotherly love, and another to spoil the Egyptian. The political tradition of the West is to *make* a man's religion indifferent by preventing him from spoiling the Egyptian. We fix the rules of conduct according to our practical knowledge of what men will do if they get the opportunity, and feel that we can safely leave the motives of their conduct to themselves. We are wise in this generation: we live under the reign of law: we are so used to it that we do not even notice it.

Perhaps I can put the strange difference in the temper of Russian literature best by saying that the Russian mind does not naturally live under the reign of law. The act has not for it, as it has for us, a fixed and final importance in itself. The act is only a manifestation of a thought or a belief or a desire; and often conversely, what a man thinks or believes, that must he act. Just as the spiritual and the temporal were inextricably knit in the Russian Empire under a Cæsar who was himself the embodiment of State and Church together, so in the individual Russian, act and belief were one: there is no separation between the practical and spiritual man. Therefore what I called roughly "the problem of conduct," which underlies Russian literature, is not—as the phrase suggests to us—chiefly a practical problem. It is not so much a question of how shall a man act, as of what shall a man believe? And when the

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famous Russian critics seem to us to be putting crude and rather irrelevant questions to famous Russian authors, they are in a sense speaking in parables. A political dogma has for them a whole background of religious or spiritual conviction.

The Russian mind, I have said, does not naturally inhabit the kingdom of law. For it, an act is not a definite, discrete thing : it is, as it were, merely a facet of a thought. And immediately there emerges the reason, or at least one reason, for a quality of Russian literature which impresses the most casual reader. The moment you take the emphasis off the act, and put it on the mind expressed in the act, the inclination to definite moral judgment diminishes : and not only the inclination, but the possibility also. Only so long as it is viewed externally (or legally) does an act remain a thing which we can judge right or wrong with the same positiveness that we pronounce a pillar-box red. Begin to consider acts as parts of thoughts, and certainty vanishes. Thoughts and beliefs may be wrong, of course; but, right or wrong, they have a look of inevitability. You begin to feel that a man cannot help thinking in a certain way any more than he can help the colour of his hair: if you can make instinctively what is for us the difficult leap which separates the act and the thought, you cannot help going farther and seeing the thought as an aspect of personality, and personality as a thing given, ultimate, irreducible, and in some way miraculous and sacred. You have given to

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the practical and spiritual nature of man a unity which you cannot again divide by a moral judgment.

The Russian mind (or at least the mind of Russian literature) is not merely free from moral prejudice, but profoundly averse to moral judgment of any kind. It has what some people would nowadays call a scientific attitude towards the conduct of men, but it did not reach it by way of the scientific outlook ; and as a matter of fact the spirit of Russian tolerance is in quality as remote from scientific indifference as it is from the English spirit of toleration. The Russian eye sees humanity in a warm light; science in a bright, but cold one; on the other side, our English toleration is a practical virtue; we hesitate to interfere, but do not hesitate to condemn. The Russian hesitates to condemn, but he would not hesitate to interfere. Our wisdom has been acquired by centuries of political experience and experiment : the wisdom of the Russian mind, of another kind than ours, hangs round it like a cloud of glory and cometh from afar. Hence you have the further paradox, again only apparent, that a people which has more than any other a spirit of tolerance almost divine, has only the most rudimentary conception of personal freedom as we understand it.

I hope these distinctions will not seem to you tedious, wire-drawn, and almost casuistical. In a way they are subtle ; but I believe that they are also fundamental. To me, entering into the Russian mind is like entering a world of another

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spiritual dimension. There is a strangeness everywhere: everything is exciting, and everything is odd; and one is conscious intuitively of a logic which holds this unfamiliar universe together, yet one finds it hard to give a clear statement of its laws. I mean that the difference between the Russian attitude and our own is at once both simple and profound; we have only to look on life with changed eyes; but to render an account of the change that is necessary is perhaps more difficult than to make it.

The instinctive suspension of moral judgment which I have tried to explain leads straight to some strange consequences. The Russian, as much as any and more than most, is conscious of the presence of pain and evil in the world, but he is far less able than another to ascribe it to guilt in the individual. He is forced to believe in an evil and a good which are absolute. Rather, I should say, this is what he desires to believe in. This is the kind of certainty in which his mind could rest; and the desire to discover such a certainty is, I believe, the driving impulse in those great Russians whom their countrymen so simply and superbly named "God-seekers." Dostoevsky lavished himself upon imaginary conceptions of this type—men who deliberately violate the moral law, who consciously trample on their own conscience, in order to discover whether retribution will follow. Will God punish them to prove that He exists? Behind it all is the feeling: if man may not condemn, God must: if God does not condemn, there is no God. Ah,

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yes, it may be said, but the Russian idea of religion, of Christianity, is less terrible than that : the real Christianity of Russia is based on the belief that God is love. That also is true. The Russian mind does instinctively fasten on the figure of the Christ ; who is, in a sense, the incarnation of the highest Russian morality. But the distinction which all men in some measure feel between Christ and God, the Russian pushes to an extreme. They set such value on Christ the man, that they cannot truly conceive Him as Christ the God. Christ is a morality ; but God must be a truth. The God for whom the "God-seekers" spend their lives in searching is He to whom Christ called at the last, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me ?"

These remarks on religion were inevitable, because the figure of Christ has a cardinal importance for the Russian attitude. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, whose imaginations were haunted by Him, were in this, as in so much else, only the great types of the Russian spirit. The great Russians are so often men of whom Dostoevsky's words hold good : "They love Christ so much that Christianity is impossible for them." Still, we may regard the impulse of the God-seekers more generally as a single form of the Russian hunger for an absolute.

I would almost say, the Russian hunger for absolutism. The Russian mind contemplates a world in which it cannot judge and cannot condemn. Some one must, however, judge and condemn, if life is to be practicable at all. So the Russian

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mind is often content, in temporal affairs, to leave the power of judgment and condemnation to an arbitrary power : it is prepared, if need be, to find a spiritual justification for it, as Dostoevsky did. And two other great Russian writers, Tolstoy and Tchekhov, were in their hearts political indifferents. This attitude of theirs, it seems to me, is only a practical manifestation of the desire which is constant in the Russian mind—the desire for a certainty which cannot be questioned. Life, as the Russian mind sees it, is infinitely fluid : not a chequer of black and white, of good and evil, but a vast expanse of shining gray. In life, the Russian mind takes everything for granted ; it sees the excuse for everything. But it makes up for this instinctive tolerance, by an amazing dogmatical rigidity where we should least expect it—in intellectual things. A political theory can become in Russia as sacred as the Divine word ; and we have lately seen one propagated with all the inquisitorial appurtenances of fire and sword. Again, Dostoevsky could be monstrously unjust to Turgenev, simply because Turgenev believed that Russia might learn a good deal from Western Europe. And yet again Tolstoy could be monstrously unjust to the whole mind of man, simply because, in his hunger for an absolute, he had decided to find one in the soul of the peasant. Any one who reads Tolstoy's *What is Art?* or Dostoevsky's attacks on the Westerners, without knowing their novels, would conclude that a great Russian was necessarily a great bigot.

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He would be wrong, hopelessly wrong. The intellectual dogmatism of the Russian mind is in inverse proportion to the tolerance of the Russian soul ; it is also, as I have tried to indicate, a consequence of it. The Russian pardons so much that when he does try to condemn, he cannot be judicial : the attitude is foreign to him.

But Russian dogmatism is a secondary quality. It is peculiar and disconcerting, and for that reason worth attention, but it is not an essential quality of Russian literature. It is the product of a desperate intellectual reaction of the Russian spirit against its own instincts. The Russian writer grows weary of accepting everything ; he feels that he is removed only by a hair's-breadth from accepting nothing—that universal sympathy is next door to nihilism (as it is)—and he clutches at a certainty in the hope of repose. But he finds no repose. The Russian spirit cannot repose. It is restless, and wanders over the face of the earth, seeking a home in vain. When Dostoevsky said that the Russian wanderer needs the happiness of all men wherein to find his own peace, he spoke the truth. But the truth is double-edged. We may regard it either as a statement of the deep disinterestedness of the Russian spirit, or of the utter hopelessness of its efforts. A man who depends for his happiness on the happiness of mankind, is doomed to misery ; he will be all his days a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

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And here, I think, we touch upon the central reality of Russian literature, the secret of its fascination, and its significance. Complete acceptance—nihilism : these are the poles of the Russian spirit. They belong to each other ; they are aspects of the same reality, and both alike are strange to us. The range of Russian literature is greater than that to which we are normally accustomed. I carefully refrain from saying that it is greater than the actual range of English literature, for reasons which I will try to give. I can perhaps put the relation best in this way. There are notes at the upper and lower end of the octave which are not habitually sounded in Western literature, and these are constantly sounded in Russian literature. These upper notes have a direct relation to the lower notes ; they depend for their existence upon each other. But it is difficult to sound them both except in literature that is representative, that is, in the drama or the novel. In pure poetry it is possible only to sound the upper notes. When English poetry had its most comprehensive form, when it was dramatic, you have both the upper and the lower notes sounded—in Shakespeare supremely, but in some of the other Elizabethan dramatists also, in Marlowe at moments, in Webster at moments. But in our other great literary period, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which was a period of non-dramatic poetry, you get only the upper notes. And we do not pay a great deal of attention to them because they are isolated : the upper notes here have not the dark volume of the

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lower notes evidently behind them to drive their significance home to us.

I will return to this and try to make my meaning clearer. For the moment, I will only say that the habitual range of Russian literature, which is almost entirely a literature of representation—a novel literature—is greater than the habitual range of our own. Perhaps we have no writer save Shakespeare who has expressed, in the sense in which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Tchehov express it, an attitude of complete acceptance, that is to say, an apprehension of human life as something which, in *all* its manifestations, exists in its own right. “Do not forswear the beggar’s wallet or the prison,” says an old Russian proverb. And, though we may think of many Western writers besides Shakespeare who have not forsworn the beggar’s wallet or the prison, if we think of them again we shall find that they were conscious, in spite of their seeming acceptance of the underworld, that it was another world than their own. They may have crossed the dividing line, but they never forget that the dividing line is there, separating the sheep from the goats, the good from the bad, the successful from the unsuccessful. They are aware of their own condescension. But the Russian writer is not. His difficulty is not to forget that the dividing line exists, but to believe in its existence at all. “To judge between good and bad, between successful and unsuccessful,” says Tchehov somewhere in his letters, “would need the eye of God.” You must take that literally;

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it means that a man, precisely because he is a man, cannot judge. That *sounds* familiar enough in our ears. We have heard from our youth up, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” We know the words well enough, just as we know, “I say unto you, Love your enemies.” But the reality beneath the words—what man of the West has ever dreamed of believing in that? Or who, among Englishmen, has ever left the judgment of the wicked or the punishment of his enemies to God? Why, our whole civilisation is built upon the very opposite of such beliefs. And rightly so built; we feel that such beliefs do not work. Indeed, they do *not* work. But it seldom crosses our minds that in putting aside beliefs that do not work, we have prejudged the issue. We never say to ourselves: Perhaps the truth may be that the importance of these dark sayings of the founder of the Christian religion may be precisely in the fact that they do not work; that they are utterly and absolutely impossible in practical life; that they mean that the man who “would see God” has to take hold of life in his two hands and throw it into the abyss; that a complete Christianity is a complete nihilism.

Now I do not want to make out that Russian literature is completely Christian in this mystical sense; but I do want to persuade you that it is more Christian than any literature has ever been. It is fantastic and strange and fascinating to us in the same way as the sayings of Christ are fantastic and strange and fascinating. One feels that the

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spirit which moves it is always making towards a desperate gamble with human life ; that it will take any risk in order to have ultimate certainty, in order "to see God." Tolstoy's end, his wandering out into the darkness to meet his death alone, his throwing away from him in a final symbolic gesture all the happiness of that life with which we are chiefly concerned, is characteristic of a central impulse in Russian literature. It is the feeling that there is a secret of life which can be discovered only by a strange sacrifice, and that life must remain unintelligible until it is discovered. Men of science also talk of the secret of life; but for the secret of life in that sense the Russian cares little or nothing. He is tormented by the desire for an answer to the question : Why is the world of men what it is? And his torment is more intense because he knows better than most men exactly what the world of men *is*. He has looked upon it without blinkers, without rose-coloured spectacles: no other literature brings us into direct contact with life as Russian literature does. Tolstoy on the one hand, Dostoevsky on the other, seem completely to have explored the universe of human action and thought. And it is precisely because they see so much and so clearly that they are haunted by the question, Why? Now, the Christian answer, I should say more generally the religious answer to this question, is that God has ordained it so. The man who can truly accept that answer is the religious man; but only he can truly accept who has truly seen. The Russian writer does *not*

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accept the answer. Herein he shows what I have called his loyalty to humanity. If God has ordained it so, then he replies like Tchehov, "I must see with the eye of God." If there is a harmony, then it must be a harmony that is visible to man. If it is visible to God, then man must be able to be God.

This torturing debate goes on and on throughout the works of Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky, more obviously than any other Russian writer, set out the argument in an intellectual and imaginative embodiment. You have it completely uttered in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan Karamazov returns God the ticket. If there is a harmony, he says, he will refuse to accept it. The pain which has been suffered by one single child will make a discord; nothing can atone for it. Even if one day it were to be revealed to him that there was a harmony, says Ivan, he must make haste to refuse it in advance. He will not pay the price for it. Nevertheless, precisely what Ivan refuses, his young brother Alyosha experiences directly ; and because he does actually experience the harmony, Ivan's gesture of refusal is impossible for Alyosha. There is no logic in this consummation; it is a miracle. Ivan's refusal holds good so long as this miracle is withheld, even though Ivan himself acknowledged that strange love in his bowels "for the sticky buds." But that instinctive love of life and the intellectual rejection of it could never be reconciled. Nothing short of a change of consciousness, a new way of apprehension could serve. The new way was opened to Alyosha.

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The passage which begins with these words is familiar to all readers of Dostoevsky :

He did not stop on the steps either, but went quickly down; his soul overflowing with rapture, yearning for freedom, space, openness. The vault of heaven full of soft, shining stars stretched out vast and fathomless above him. The Milky Way ran in two pale streams from the zenith to the horizon. The fresh, motionless, still night enfolded the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the cathedral gleamed out against the sapphire sky. The gorgeous autumn flowers, in the beds round the house, were slumbering till morning. The silence of the earth seemed to melt into the silence of the stars. The mystery of the earth was one with the mystery of the stars.

Now the particular form in which this ecstasy of acceptance is expressed is peculiar to Dostoevsky; but I think you will find the process of mind of which it is the culmination, and the culmination itself even more wonderfully expressed in Shakespeare. Shakespeare's final period—the period of *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*—is often called a period of serenity. I do not believe that it was any more serene than Dostoevsky's final period, or Tolstoy's, or Beethoven's : I do not believe that the greatest men of genius are ever serene. What happens to them, I think, is that they give up the struggle to understand.

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Perhaps I am rash to generalise; but at any rate I should like to point out the strange likeness between Shakespeare's serenity and Dostoevsky's. If you consider Shakespeare's last plays, you will find that common to them all is an emphasis on youth and a wistful, half-certain faith in it : Perdita, Imogen, Marina, Miranda, Ferdinand, Florizel—these are the figures which haunted Shakespeare's mind as it was growing old. Further, you will, I think, admit that these plays of so-called "serenity" which are so often supposed to answer the problems of the great tragic period which began with *Hamlet* and culminated in *Antony and Cleopatra* do not, in fact, answer those problems at all. The plays of the final period are smaller in scope; the general effect is something as though the Beethoven of the Ninth Symphony and the Great Mass had finished up as Mozart,—beautiful, magical, but as it were dancing aside from the full shock of human destinies. So Shakespeare, in his final period, turns aside from his own problems. We feel that he is weary of them ; that he has found them unanswerable in terms of the human existence from which they arise. What he does is to create a new generation of beings who trail their clouds of glory with them still, young hearts about which the shades of the prison house will never close, minds—

For which the burthen of the mystery,
For which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened,—

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is more than lightened, has ceased entirely to exist. Shakespeare looked forward in imagination to the birth of a new race, which, like Miranda, would look upon the world with the rapt eyes of wonder: "O brave new world, That has such creatures in it." Shakespeare's Mirandas and Perditas are the counterpart of Dostoevsky's Alyosha. We cannot tell how far either of these men of genius believed in his own creation; perhaps less than we do; but the meaning of the creations is the same.

I point this parallel in order to show what I hinted at before—that the preoccupations of Russian literature are not really different from those of our own; and perhaps this truth has been accidentally confirmed by the fact that the condition of mind from which Dostoevsky sought an issue has been most naturally illustrated by a quotation from Wordsworth. I might equally have sought the illustrations in the strange, disturbing text of the final version of Keats's *Hyperion*. The preoccupations of the Russian spirit are not peculiar, but universal. What differentiates Russian literature is the clearness and directness with which these preoccupations and the condition of mind from which they arise are expressed, the way in which the creative energies of a whole literature were focused and concentrated upon them, and the comprehensiveness with which they are presented. The English genius, in its highest manifestations not less responsive to these supreme spiritual issues, rises more gradually than the Russian from the

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realm of the practical consciousness. The sudden speculative flight of the Russian, embracing the temporal and the spiritual in a single sweep, the instant readiness to set the whole of earthly life at hazard, the deep-rooted feeling in the Russian soul expressed in the words of a Russian critic, that "any answer is better than none," these qualities are not quite central to the English genius, and if they were precious qualities of its own would have to make way for them.

The difference, I say, is chiefly one of concentration. The Russian has not passed, as we have, through centuries of history spent in perfecting an existence wherein ultimate questions should not enter to disturb. He has not the weight of inherited social wisdom to steady (from one point of view), to retard (from another) his abruptness in questioning the whole scheme of things. Therefore the tempo of the Russian spirit is different from ours, and we are sometimes slow to recognise with our minds, though we have recognised it quickly enough with our hearts, the close affinity between the underlying motives of great Russian literature and our own.

Indeed, Russian literature is, historically, a fulfilment of our own. The mastery which was ours at the beginning of the last century passed indisputably to Russia. But the problems which tormented our three great poets of a century ago, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats and, more crudely, Byron, are the problems which were taken up by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Tchehov. In their

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simplest form they resolve into this : " How shall man be reconciled to life ? Is reconciliation and acceptance possible ? " Byron presented the problem, or rather himself embodied it, in an imposing, dramatic way which struck the imagination of Europe ; and the father of Russian literature, Pushkin, is the direct descendant or disciple of Byron, though his poetry is far subtler and more magical than Byron's ever was. But Byron was, compared to the other three English poets I have named, superficial and stagey ; he holds a larger place in the literature of Europe than he does in our own. His grandiose gesture was designed to be seen at a distance. For a profound handling of the problem we must go, however, to Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. Each of these men, though two of them died mere boys, fought out the issue to some sort of solution. What the particular solutions were there is no time to discuss here : they are to be found in *Tintern Abbey*, in *Adonais*, and in the Revised Induction to *Hyperion*. Speaking roughly, Wordsworth found the answer in a direct intuition of an essential harmony in the human universe :

When with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy
We see into the life of things.

So did Dostoevsky's Alyosha. Shelley's answer is really of the same kind, though he uses the language of Platonism :

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That sustaining love
Which through the web of being blindly wove
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
The fire for which all thirst.

And Keats's answer is in his vision of Moneta,
from the height which none can usurp

But those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery and will not let them rest.

Let me read the description of Moneta ; for that
goddess is a wonderful symbol of the harmony
apprehended by a great poetic mind.

Then saw I a wan face
Not pined by human sorrows, but bright-blanch'd
By an immortal sickness which kills not ;
It works a constant change, which happy death
Can put no end to : deathwards progressing
To no death was that visage ; it had past
The lily and the snow ; and beyond these
I must not think now, though I saw that face.
But for her eyes, I should have fled away ;
They held me back with a benignant light,
Soft, mitigated by divinest lids
Half-closed, and visionless entire they seemed
Of all external things ; they saw me not,
But in blank splendour beamed, like the mild
 moon,
Who comforts those she sees not, who knows not
What eyes are upward cast.

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An apprehension of harmony which includes, and by including, justifies all evil and pain, is the end to which those three great poets strove, and the quest was taken up by the great Russians. Such a harmony, if it exists, is a thing of which the human soul, under the present dispensation, can have but fleeting glimpses. And even in those who have it the moment of vision is followed by the moment of disbelief. After he has told of the moment in which "we see into the heart of things," not even Wordsworth can refrain from crying, "Oh, if this be but a vain belief." The same doubt troubles them all. So some of the great spirits, like Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, imagine a new race of beings whose vision of harmony shall be constant, for whom the glory shall not pass away: another giant, Tolstoy, believes, or tries to believe, that the miracle will happen if he can throw his life away and face, like Lear, the elements alone. This Titan, who was of the earth earthy, sees the most naked manifestation of evil in death; in the cessation of the life which had been poured into him so abundantly. And he passes more and more under the spell of the strange teaching of Christ; it is the most mystical and incomprehensible elements in that teaching which fascinates him—utter humility and non-resistance to evil. The man who was by nature the realist of realists, who had the gift of re-creating physical life as perhaps no one, not even Shakespeare, had it before him, rushes destiny-driven into the most unearthly of all religions in the hope

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that he will thus be able to see with the eyes of God.

Nowadays it often happens that to say that a literature is inspired by the question, "Does God exist?" provokes only a slightly contemptuous smile. What an odd and provincial concern ! whisper the wise young men of to-day. Literature cannot have a moral purpose ; literature is Art. But great literature happens to be a great deal more than art; it is art used for the presentation of the deepest issues of human life. And the deepest issue of all is precisely this question : Does God exist ? But we have to understand the question. It means : Is there a harmony in this various, contradictory, and pain-ridden world of ours ? The existence of God means that there is such a harmony. And, again, before we have the right even to put the question so, we have to be deeply conscious of the apparent discord, oppressed by the problems of pain. The words of Keats are true :

None can usurp this height
But those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery and will not let them rest.

Of the Russian writers that holds good pre-eminently. I have tried to give some reasons why it is truer of them than it is of the writers of most nations, unless they belong to the highest order.

The Russian has not learned to attach the names

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of good and evil to acts ; he attaches them to beings. Those who, like most socially civilised nations, think of good and evil chiefly in the form of acts, come naturally to believe that evil is eradicable. An evil act can be punished or prevented; but an evil being is much more elemental. And so the Russian sees the problem of human life much more nakedly than we naturally do. Hence, also, comes that quality of an almost divine sympathy with the social outcast, which is to many of us the first attraction felt when we enter the world of the Russian mind.

The Russian is more acutely, more immediately conscious of the discord ; so he is more acutely, more immediately conscious of the urgency of the question : Is there a harmony ? Or, is there a God ? This is the debate which, in a thousand forms, occupies the minds of the characters of Russian fiction: it is as absorbing in Tolstoy and Tchehov, in Turgenev even, as it is in Dostoevsky. It is more apparent in Russian literature than in English, but, as I have tried to show, the debate is really just as essential to the highest English' literature as it is to the Russian: the form of the debate is different, that is all.

However, in the work of Anton Tchehov the Russian genius has definitely carried the debate further than it was carried before. If the particular genius of Tchehov is not, as indeed it is not, as great and commanding as that of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, it is perhaps more subtle. Tchehov begins, at least he begins that portion of his work

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which we can call characteristically his, with the unshakable conviction that there is no solution to the problem, there is no harmony. And he gives up beforehand the attempt to find one. What is more, in his work he deliberately concentrates upon human life in its least harmonious aspects. Where the discord is naked and most evidently beyond human resolution, there is the hand of Tchehov delicately revealing it, without a shadow of mitigation. In *The Dreary Story* the old Professor can only say, "I don't know," when Katy asks him what she is to do. She is broken and young ; he is broken and old ; he is too honest to deceive her. *The Black Monk* leads his victim to a beatific vision of the universe, to such an entrancing and celestial vision as was vouchsafed to Alyosha Karamazov, and behold ! when his victim enters into his happiness, he falls on the floor dead : his dream was the dream of delirium. Or again in *The Lady with the Dog*, there is no way out for those hopeless, hapless lovers : they read their future in each other's eyes and acknowledge it : there is nothing to be done, nothing. And finally *The Cherry Orchard* falls to the inevitable axe ; the sound of the axe-stroke echoes in our ears as the curtain falls on Firs, the old manservant, in the deserted house. They have forgotten him.

Harmony ! When we first read Tchehov, the very word, the very idea, seems only a cruel joke of the power which produced the consciousness of man to conceive it. We think, when we first read Tchehov, perhaps even more than when we read

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Hardy, of Hardy's bitter speculation "whether man's consciousness was a mistake of God's." We think that, I say, when we first read Tchekhov, but only when we read him first. The second time our breath is caught with wonder. What is this strange magician doing to us ; what spell has he cast upon our souls ? Discord, the extreme of discord, and yet this music is divine. Fragments, a medley of fragments, yet this pattern is celestial. These fingers that only touch life to destroy it, bestow a breathless beauty on whatever they descend. His extreme denial is an affirmation. There is no harmony, he cries, and the very sound of his voice echoes the music of the spheres.

Gentlemen, were I to confess the whole extent of my admiration of Anton Tchekhov, I should be ashamed. It is an adoration. I know that he is not a great writer in the sense in which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were. And yet I think he achieved a greater victory than they did. Tolstoy went out into the night: Dostoevsky left us half-finished a novel whose half is one of the two greatest novels in the world: Tchekhov gave us *The Cherry Orchard*. And, for people like us, who can watch the struggles of heroes but cannot be heroes ourselves, Tchekhov's was the most precious gift of all. Tolstoy set up his everlasting rest in a symbolic gesture; Dostoevsky said that men must be born again to see the world with the eyes of Alyosha. There is a harmony, perhaps, it may be so, they said : if there is, or if there is not, the most terrible risk is worth taking in order that we may know. That was

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heroically said, and heroically done. Those were great voices that will sound on to the end of humanity. Tchehov's is only a whisper. But it whispers this : Perhaps—perhaps—the harmony is there, all the time. I have believed in nothing, I have trusted nothing, I have hoped for nothing—but yet—look,—look again.

You know *The Dreary Story*. It is perhaps the earliest of Tchehov's characteristic works. In it, he who was an amusing comic writer in the Russian *Punch*, suddenly became a magician. The old Professor and Katy meet for the last time : he tells the story himself.

“ Only one word, only one word.” She weeps and stretches out her hands to me. “ What shall I do ? ”

But he cannot say : he turns the conversation. Katy gets up and, without looking at him, holds out her hands to him.

“ I want to ask her : So it means you won't be at my funeral ? But she does not look at me. Her hand is cold and like a stranger's. . . . I escort her to the door in silence. . . . She goes out of the room and walks down the long passage, without looking back. She knows that my eyes are following her, and probably on the landing she will look back. No, she has not looked back. The black dress has showed for the last time, her steps are stilled. . . . Good-bye, my treasure ! ”

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"Good-bye, my treasure!" There is the magic that makes a paradise of a desert of human hopes. We look again, we listen : yes, the harmony is there. And if the harmony is where Tchehov found it, then it is everywhere. He is, in the great company of men of genius, the latest-born. He comes, the youngest son, and there is no inheritance for him. The great estate of human life has been divided; so he goes off alone into the waste and desolate places, the dreary commonplace wildernesses of the spirit, which are as like the wildernesses of the heroic writers, as the waste ground in a modern city is like the majestic jungles of the Amazon. Tchehov goes there, without hope, without belief ; it is the last of all forlorn quests: and he brings back the Grail in his hands.

To my sense, Russian literature ends with Tchehov: he is the last great Russian writer; he is also the last great writer, for he belonged to a generation after the two great writers who are living with us still. He is the end of a period ; and the new period has not yet begun, either in Russian literature or in European. We need not talk of Tchehov's secret; besides, it is much simpler to share in it by reading him. But we may take from his Notebooks a sentence which contains the mysterious accent of the last great voice of Russian literature. It chimes with the other voices ; it is only different, simpler in some ways, stranger in others, infinitely softer : strangest of all in its power of taking one utterly unawares.

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Essentially all this is crude and meaningless, and romantic love appears as meaningless as an avalanche which involuntarily rolls down a mountain and overwhelms people. But when one listens to music, all this is—that some people lie in their graves and sleep, and that one woman is alive and, gray-haired, is now sitting in a box in the theatre, seems quiet and majestic, and the avalanche is no longer meaningless, since in nature everything has a meaning. And everything is forgiven, and it would be strange not to forgive.

[November, 1922.]

Anton Tchehov

Anton Tchehov

FOR some reason or other it seems an incredibly bold thing to write a book about Tchehov. One would need in one's words the voice which Gorki said Tolstoi was wont to use when speaking of the beloved writer, a voice with some delicate, intimate modulation, with the quality of a caress. To be less than exquisitely true in one's appreciation of what he wrote and was holds the menace of complete disaster.

What is the cause of this strange and particular inhibition? Why this particular fear? The would-be critic thinks ahead and imagines his essay or his book before him. There in the midst of his own words is a paragraph of quotation, a sentence that might be taken from almost anywhere in Tchehov's works; and suddenly in the light of its rainbow radiance all that he himself has said appears fumbling and clumsy and vulgar. It is the menace of one's own self-revelation that is frightening.

To write about Tchehov is nothing less than an ordeal. One cannot hope to emerge from it unscathed. Mr. Gerhardi has not managed that.¹ But it is no small thing for any one who has felt within himself the subtle and secret spell of Tchehov to have the courage of the ordeal. It may be in Mr. Gerhardi's case partly the courage of youth;

¹ Anton Tchehov. By William Gerhardi (Cobden-Sanderson), 1923.

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in another ten years, perhaps, when Tchehov might appear to him still wiser, still truer, and still nearer, his confidence might have failed him. He might then have been gently excruciated, as we are, by his juxtaposition of sentence after sentence from Mr. Wells's *The Undying Fire*, with sentence after sentence in which Tchehov has allowed his characters to declare his faith. Mr. Wells is a man of genius, but his genius is of another order than Tchehov's. Where Mr. Wells fumbles, Tchehov is certain; where Mr. Wells is crude, Tchehov is exquisite. To set them side by side is to deal unfairly by the one and to show a lack of understanding of the other, and all to no real purpose ; for their faiths like their sensibilities are of a different kind.

Let us admit then that in such an attempt it was impossible for Mr. Gerhardi to avoid making us wince by touching upon a nerve occasionally; and let us remember that it is probably true that such a thing had to be done young or not at all. Then we can freely rejoice that the thing has been done ; for it is certainly better that it should be done than left undone. Still, we have not yet touched even the fringe of the obdurate main question : Why do we feel this intimate and personal loyalty to Tchehov ? Why is he set so close to our hearts that even the critic's minor misphrasings, even the choice of a mistaken word, should be felt as a physical pain ? We try to think calmly. We are being ridiculous (we say to ourselves), foolishly hyper-sensitive. If any one were to make these

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small mistakes about Shakespeare, or Tolstoi, or, Dickens, why, we should not care at all. But alas, the reply to this attempt at sober reasoning with ourselves is simply that the argument is only too true. If it were Shakespeare, if it were Tolstoi, we certainly should not care ; but it is Tchehov, and we do.

So in the last resort it seems that we are sensitive about Tchehov because he is a writer about whom, if we feel deeply at all, we feel in this intensely personal way. His case is unique. Our reaction, our queer desire to protect him from our own roughness, to save him from the coarseness of all critical approximation, at first appears to be quite independent of his greatness. He is not a Shakespeare ; he is not a Tolstoy—never, in our wildest enthusiasm, have we made a mistake in proportion about him : somehow he does not invite such mistakes. And, after all, this period of “ wild enthusiasm ” is a phrase, not a reality. There never was such a period. Our enthusiasm for Tchehov never grows, never diminishes : we take him into ourselves, and he is part of our lives for ever.

He is not great, we say, and then we wonder : whether it is not precisely because we feel him so near to us that we refuse him the name. We cannot tolerate that he should be removed from us to a mountain-top, and enveloped in a cloud. Perhaps it is not that he is not great, but that we cannot afford to let him be ; and it may be that *his* greatness consists not least in this, that no writer of whom we know more obstinately avoided the

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attribute. Or we may put what is ultimately the same paradox in this way : Here is a writer who is more intimately dear to us than any other, whose truth is exactly our own truth, whom we do not have to interpret, for whom we never at any moment have to make allowances; and yet his writing seems to us new, not new in parts and old in others, not new in method and old in substance, but simply and wholly new.

It is passing strange, this mystery of no mystery; and exceedingly hard to hold firm before the eye of the mind. There is no point on which to fix, no visible mark of joining between his world, his consciousness and ours. Tchehov calls for no efforts, demands no abjurations,—nothing of “that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith,” which was the inseparable condition of all literature before him. We have, it seems, only to open our eyes, and his world will be in front of us : we open them, and it is not there. If we are writers, we think for a vain moment of assimilating Tchehov’s method—Mr. Gerhardi thinks of it—and the method slips through our fingers like quicksilver : we try to fix it, and we are left with a handful of airy negations—no plot, no ornament, no construction, no lies—and the smiling despair of this conclusion, that Tchehov wrote like Tchehov because he was Tchehov, and that if we want to write like him—and who would not?—we must *be* like him. To see his world is not, after all, merely a question of opening our eyes, but of opening other eyes than ours.

Anton Tchehov

In Harnack's *History of the Western Church* is told the story—from which of the Fathers it comes we have forgotten—of a Christian who was haled before a Roman magistrate. The magistrate asked him how it was possible for him to believe in such a simple religion—it was in the *very* early days of the Church—a creed so naked that it gave the mind nothing to take hold of, whereas the superb complications of Roman mythology offered an anchorage to the least prehensile of minds. And the Christian answered that the secret of his faith was the mystery of simplicity—*mysterium simplicitatis*. This haunting Latin phrase, cavernous with spiritual profundity, yet in its whole effect so lucid and child-like, is the one we should choose if we were summoned to describe Tchehov's work in a word. He is still accused, as he was accused by Merezhkovski thirty years ago, of writing about “failures,” of being gray and depressing and painful; and it would be vain even to attempt to reply to a charge so manifestly based on insensitivity to what he was, were it not that his own comment on the criticism has the luminous directness of the mysterious simplicity that was his. “One would need to be a God,” he said, “to decide which are the failures and which the successes in life.” And when we read that, we suddenly remember that the great Tacitus had no doubt to which class belonged the fellow of the name of Christ.

Most of all, it is this quality of mysterious simplicity in Tchehov's presentation of life which first prevents us from regarding the depths of

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understanding below. It is as though he understood not only that life was so, but also that it must be so ; as though he knew a secret. And the secret, as all true secrets must be, is very, very simple, so simple that we cannot recognise it; we can recognise only a strange enchantment in what he shows us, a strange and haunting quality in his words. We look and listen, and we feel that we are trembling on the brink of a knowledge so incredible that it cannot be. We do not know what to say ; we cannot understand what is happening in ourselves ; we are overwhelmed by a single feeling, which when we try to hold it before our eyes, splinters like light through a crystal into contradictory emotions: laughter, tears, pity, love, and one knows not what infinite and unfamiliar tenderness from our depths. Yet these are blended and made one by a kind of sacramental solemnity: we have been made partakers of a mystery. And Tchekov works this magic on our souls again and again and again. We could choose the endings of twenty of his stories, quote sentences by the hundred from them, in which, with no essential diminution through the veil of a foreign language, the miracle is accomplished. For a single instance, take the ending of *The Lady with the Dog* :

Then they spent a long while taking counsel together, talked of how to avoid the necessity of secrecy, of deception, of living in different towns and not seeing each other for long at a time. How could they be free from this intolerable bondage ?

Anton Tchehov

"How? How?" he asked, clutching his head. "How?"

And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new and splendid life would begin; and it was clear to them both that they still had a long, long way to go, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning.

The response which that awakens within us is an inaudible *Nunc dimittis* set to some new and unknown melody. We are grave, we are quiet, we are gathered to ourselves; for our eyes have seen, and our hearts have understood, a mystery.

That which Tchehov makes us feel, he felt: we cannot maintain the vision, but he could: what is a miracle to us was to him a faculty of nature. He saw what seem to our bewildered eyes immeasurably complicated and subtle things *sub specie simplicitatis*. From where he stood life was—exactly what life is, yet it was one. He did not need to exclude anything; not a single one of the thousand seemingly insoluble discords which in our lives we know had to be set aside and ignored by him. On the contrary, where the discord is at extremity and the tangle most obviously beyond all solution this side the grave, to that point before all others he turns: and lo! the harmony is there. In our everyday language, in the framework of our everyday belief, the situation in *The Lady with the Dog* would be to some impossible, to others immoral, to both, manifestly intolerable and beyond

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all human remedy. "Look again," Tchehov seems to whisper ; we look, and everything is transfigured. There is only one gesture for us, if we have eyes to see—to bow our heads, in the knowledge that it must be so and not otherwise.

There are dangers in this word simplicity. It seems that few people understand (or if many understand, few remember) that there are two kinds of spiritual simplicity. There is the simplicity of the child, and the simplicity of the man : the one comes before the great struggle of self-discovery begins, the other when it is ended. There is the simplicity of *Love's Labour Lost*, and the simplicity of *The Tempest* ; of birth, and of rebirth. And our language is still so far from a final perfection that we are compelled to use one name for both, or to describe the second condition by metaphors taken from the first. The simplicity of Tchehov is very wise and very old ; it is an achievement wrung out of much knowledge and surpassing inward honesty. Tchehov began to learn very early in his life : at a time when most Englishmen are still schoolboys he had learned not only to bear but to accept an overwhelming burden of responsibility. Read the letter to his brother which he wrote when he was only twenty-six:¹ it is an incredible document, for it contains the humanity and the wisdom and the humour which even men of genius are not wont to acquire till they are old. And this personal heritage of experience, important though it was, is

¹ Or one, even more remarkable, because written when he was twenty-three, in *The Adelphi*, June, 1924.

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less important than his impersonal inheritance of the great explorations of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, who had brought the European consciousness to a verge. There was nothing for it, if Tchehov was to *be* at all, but to be a new man.

And that is what we feel he was. Those amazing letters of his which come so near to us, are simple and strange in a new way; they seem to us perfectly natural, more natural than any letters we have ever read, yet they are quite unlike any other letters we have read; they belong to a different kind, they are informed by a new consciousness. They are simple, the attitude of which they are the natural product is simple, but we sense in that simplicity a complete knowledge of all the complexities with which the modern consciousness is laden. Tchehov had somehow passed beyond all this. Mr. Gerhardi's instinct is right when he protests against the attitude of those who regard a Marcel Proust or a James Joyce as the advanced outposts of the literary consciousness to-day. Tchehov is far in advance of them ; by his side they are curious antiquarian survivals of a superseded past. Tchehov's work is indeed a resolution of their illimitable intellectualisms. His simplicity completely undercuts their complexities.

For Tchehov knew where the intellectual consciousness was impotent ; and he knew it was impotent precisely for the apprehension of the eternal livingness of life. Entangled in the maze of complicated accidents, it misses the essence. In *The Duel*, von Koren gropes in vain after some

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understanding of the impossible Laevsky, until at the last the rigidity of his honest mind is melted by a simple intuition into the nature of Laevsky's being ; and the reconciliation which ensues is as profound as any of the more striking reconciliations in which the great drama of old used to culminate. For Tchehov, who preached nothing deliberately, in reality preached no less than this : a reconciliation here and now, achieved by an understanding not from the mind, but from the soul, or more truly from a reborn soul. And, as though expressly for our illumination, Tchehov in his Notebooks isolated the quintessence of the reconciliation which is his.

Essentially all this is crude and meaningless, and romantic love appears as meaningless as an avalanche which involuntarily rolls down a mountain and overwhelms people. But when one listens to music, all this is—that some people lie in their graves and sleep, and that one woman is alive and, gray-headed, is now sitting in a box in the theatre, seems quiet and majestic, and the avalanche is no longer meaningless, since in nature everything has a meaning. And everything is forgiven, and it would be strange not to forgive.

This condition which Tchehov experienced when he listened to music, we experience when we listen to Tchehov. It would be not impossible, not inhuman, not stupid, but simply strange not to forgive.

This forgiveness is not the result of an effort ; indeed it is not what we understand by forgiveness at all ; the name has been carried from the past to define a new condition of the consciousness. If one were truly conscious of some fundamental harmony, if one steadily knew that everything had a meaning, then forgiveness and unforgivingness would have none : for they have meaning only in a world which is ignorant of its own.

And here, perhaps, we come nearest to the newness of Tchehov. What in other men would be some kind of intermittent and bewildering mystical perception, in him was a steady mode of apprehension ; and because it was that, it seems extraordinarily simple and intangible. He makes no claim for himself : he is perfectly ready to admit that he is "lemonade" compared to the strong drink of the great men before him, or that they had purposes—"axes to grind"—and he has none. Yet imperceptibly we realise (more with our hearts than our heads) that he is single as those great men never were single ; he was harmonious, where they were still divided ; he did not have to struggle his life long to forgive, he forgave. Yet so soon as we begin to use these ambitious phrases, we are afraid. He, who knew so much, whose writing was so incomparably subtle, who when we try to analyse him becomes so complex, in reality astonishes us by the impression of his simplicity. And it may be that, after all, the truest description of him is the most elementary : that he was a different *kind* of man. It happens with us in regard to Tchehov,

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as it happened with the man in his story, *The Wife*, in regard to the doctor.

I listened to the doctor, and, according to my habit, applied my usual measures to him—materialist, idealist, money-grubber, herd-instincts, and so forth, but not a single one of my measures would fit even approximately ; and, curiously, while I only listened to him and looked at him, he was, as a man, perfectly clear to me, but the moment I began applying my measures to him he became, despite all his sincerity and simplicity, an extraordinarily complex, confused, and inexplicable nature.

And nothing could, in fact, be simpler in itself and in its manifestations than this new consciousness of Tchehov's. There are in his letters, for instance, hardly any "profound thoughts," and yet the most trivial incident recorded in them seems to have a profound importance ; if he makes a joke, we feel that nobody ever made a joke like that before. It is not in the least, as he sometimes pretends, that he is too trivial to pay attention to the deep speculations and debates of the *intelligentsia*, or that he is one of those would-be hierophants who reduce life to terms of some undifferentiated origin out of which life has differentiated itself. He accepts all the complexities, he sacrifices nothing ; he simply makes us feel that everything has a meaning, and that he knows it. Of course, he cannot tell us the meaning : no man will ever be able to do

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that, for knowledge of meaning can only come with a change in the nature of consciousness.

The more we try to make clear to ourselves the unique and essential reality of Tchehov, the more inevitable appears the conclusion that some such prophetic change had actually occurred in him, so that he saw things with some simple and direct apprehension of their nature, of which we can recognise the truth though the process eludes us. The transparent simplicity of his descriptions of things which to other minds are intricate and complicated is disconcerting. He wants to show that a man is in love with his wife : this is how he does it :

That which in her words was just, seemed to him uncommon, extraordinary ; and that which differed from his own convictions was, in his view, naïve and touching.

Astonishing effects achieved by simple means have always been the prerogative of the finest art; but these effects of Tchehov's are different from those attained before him. They do not make the impression of flashes of incredible intuition, and far less of some superhuman gift of creation, but of some quite human faculty of knowledge which unfortunately we do not possess. The illumination is so steady and unemphatic that at first it often escapes us altogether; then comes a period when we do notice it and put it down to some sort of deliberate method employed by Tchehov—Mr.

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Gerhardi shows some of the signs of this period—but finally we are forced to the conclusion that it was a natural function of Tchehov's consciousness, and his consciousness a natural function of his being. Tchehov does not insist, but his lack of insistence comes not from a deliberate artistic purpose, but by nature. He is not resisting a temptation—as we feel Flaubert is resisting a temptation in, for instance, *Un Cœur Simple*—he is merely expressing a vision and stating a knowledge which are natural to him. In his world it would be as strange to insist as it would be strange not to forgive.

It seems that at this point we begin to touch the secret of the intense and sensitive personal loyalty which Tchehov's admirers feel towards him. Much more immediately than in the case of any other writer all that he wrote appears to us as a function of all that he was. It is not easy to explain why the closeness of the relation between his seeing and his being should be so striking, or so unmistakably acknowledged by us. We have and know the Letters and the Notebooks, it is true, and these are, more than such things are wont to be, of one piece with his stories and plays ; but that is not the cause. We knew the connection long before the Letters and the Notebooks were revealed to us. The cause is rather that, if we leave aside a few comic stories of his nonage, there is an all-pervading unity in his work. There is a point in his too brief life (and it occurs unbelievably early) after which there is no perceptible evolution

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in his work, and above all no perceptible struggle. Suddenly he is mature, and he remains mature; and it becomes almost impossible to say that one piece of work is better than another. At most, we can have personal and irrational preferences. Every story, every play, every letter, after this moment, is new; but all alike belong to the same order. There was a moment when Tchehov possessed his knowledge and possessed himself in a new way.

But why, it may be asked, because he possessed his knowledge did he necessarily possess himself? There are two answers : one, that knowledge of this kind cannot be achieved without possession of oneself : that sounds almost mystical. Therefore it is better to insist on the second, which is, that if we mean his comprehension of life—outstrips his own inward development, no power on earth can conceal the traces of the conflict and contradiction in his work. In Tchehov's work these traces are invisible ; instead his powers are steady and equable ; there is neither sign of disturbance nor evidence of hesitation. As is the work, so is the man : the work is new and true, the man also.

If we could know the process of this inward development in Tchehov, we should know something of infinite value to humanity. But like all things of the highest spiritual value, it cannot be *known* ; if it were put into words we should not understand them, any more than we understand the words into which still greater souls than Tchehov

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have put their secret. Moreover, Tchehov was reticent about it. Practically all we have is a letter he wrote when he was twenty-eight to Suvorin (in 1888) soon after his play *Ivanov* had drawn upon him the attention of Russia. He is speaking of the play:

As far as my design does, I was on the right track, but the execution is good for nothing. I ought to have waited! I am glad I did not listen to Grigorovich two or three years ago, and write a novel! I can just imagine what a lot of good material I should have spoiled. He says: "Talent and freshness overcome everything." It is truer to say that talent and freshness can spoil a great deal. In addition to plenty of material and talent, one wants something else which is no less important. One wants to be mature—that is one thing; and for another *the feeling of personal freedom* is essential, and that feeling has only recently begun to develop in me. I used not to have it before; its place was successfully filled by my frivolity, carelessness, and lack of respect for my work. What writers belonging to the upper class have received by nature for nothing, plebeians acquire at the cost of their youth.

It was Tchehov himself who underlined the words: "the feeling of personal freedom." Of course, it is a mere momentary fancy of his that personal freedom of the kind he means is the gift of nature

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to the aristocrat. It is something which no man has by nature, and very few, be they aristocrats or plebeians, achieve at all : it is a sense of one's own personal existence and validity independent of all circumstance : it is the profoundest of all kinds of self-knowledge, and no one can receive it without paying the full price. Tchehov leaves us in no doubt what he meant if we read his letters carefully. "I believe," he wrote elsewhere, "in individual people, I see salvation in individual personalities scattered here and there all over Russia—whether they belong to the intelligentsia or to the peasants—they are strong though they are few." For this feeling of personal freedom of which he knew the importance and the cost is the mark of the true and completed individuality, the sign of independent self-existence. Such individuals are the pioneers of humanity, and on them the future of true civilisation does indeed depend. At another time, also in a letter to Suvorin, Tchehov described the process as "squeezing the slave out of oneself."

Write a story (he says) of how a young man, the son of a serf, who has served in a shop, sung in a choir, been at a high school and a university, who has been brought up to respect every one of higher rank and position, to kiss priests' hands, to reverence other people's ideas, to be thankful for every morsel of bread, who has been many times whipped, who has trudged from one pupil to another without goloshes, who has been used to fighting, and tormenting

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animals, who has liked dining with his rich relations, and been hypocritical before God and men from the mere consciousness of his own insignificance — write how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and how waking one beautiful morning he feels that he has no longer a slave's blood in his veins, but a real man's.

Tchehov states it so unobtrusively that we may easily pass it by, and even if we notice it, may forget how vital this inward achievement was to his real maturity as a writer.

So vital indeed that the truest of all brief definitions of his writing would be that it is the writing of a perfectly free man : a man who has freed himself from all fears and has found that within himself which enables him to stand completely alone. When a man has attained this freedom and unity in himself, he does not need to send his intellect any more on fruitless expeditions after meanings : somehow he knows the meaning. And such a man can afford to love humanity as Tchehov loved it, for he is in no danger of entanglement; he does not love for the sake of being loved. And the knowledge of a free man is steady and unfaltering—a possession for ever—because there is, in that which knows, no变ability, neither any shadow of turning.

We catch a glimpse of Tchehov's secret ; we cannot know it wholly : if we did, we should be like him, and to be like him would be to be far in

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advance of what we are. But in so far as we do understand what he wrote and was, and have a sense of the simple unity of his seeing and his being, we are not surprised that Tchehov's method has found so few followers, nor do we wonder why the one conspicuous attempt to imitate him (in Mr. Shaw's *Heartbreak House*) is merely a revelation of a strange insensibility in Mr. Shaw, or why the juxtaposition of Mr. Wells's declarations of faith with Tchehov's is impossible ; nor are we any longer perplexed for the reason why we feel an intense and unique personal loyalty to a writer whom most of us know only in translation : for we know that Tchehov made himself a new man by a great spiritual victory, that a kindred victory in ourselves is the condition of using his method, and that the victory, like all victories of this high kind, was won on our behalf.

[November, 1923.]

Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust

THE most apparent phases in the evolution of literature are marked by a twofold change, a change in the intelligence and a change in the sensibility that find expression in it. The writers of a new period seem both to know and to feel more than the writers of the period before them ; and these separate developments are bound together in the mesh of a continual interaction. They feel more because they know more. A man who has absorbed into his consciousness the aimless principle of Natural Selection develops a new nerve of sensibility which perceives, isolates, and emphasises a quality of aimlessness in all experience. Similarly, a man who has assimilated the Freudian psychology will respond with a new awareness to every manifestation of the sex impulse in the life before his eyes. Every atom of new knowledge that is really apprehended and digested by the mind serves, if not positively to enlarge, at least to rearrange the mechanism of the sensibility. In life we look for that which we know and feel that for which we are prepared. The logicians assure us that it is impossible to know or feel anything besides.

But these epoch-making changes in the intelligence and the sensibility, though they mark the historical advance of one period upon another, and serve to distinguish phases of the general consciousness and of the literature into which it is

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projected, do not necessarily mark an advance in the quality of the literature itself. The changed sensibility will respond to many elements in experience which have hitherto passed unnoticed ; it will emphasise, and may easily over-emphasise them. It will be induced to fasten upon a new truth of fact—as, for example, the ubiquity of the sex impulse under the strangest disguises—and to neglect old truths of fact which are not less true because they are familiar—as, for example, that the disguises which the sex-impulse is compelled to assume are essential to civilisation. So that when we leave the historical or evolutionary aspect of literature for literature itself, the significance of a change in the general intelligence and sensibility becomes dependent upon the degree of comprehensiveness that has been reached after the change. An extension of the sensibility has in itself no literary value; and, even when the creative alchemy of art has intervened, the expression of a new emotion will be far less significant than the expression of a comprehensive attitude to life, into which the new perceptions have been absorbed.

The final purpose of literature remains “to see life steadily and see it whole” ; but the definition is insufficient because it may equally be applied to the scientist or the philosopher. The writer sees and re-creates the quality of life as a whole, the quality of experience being precisely the element which is ignored by philosophy and science. Only in so far as the extension of the sensibility which comes with an advance in knowledge is made to

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heighten the perception of the quality of experience as a whole can it have a positive literary value. By the aid of the new psychology we may be able to detect the working of the sex impulse in an incident of life where we did not previously suspect it; but this power is useless to the writer unless it enables him to seize more completely the unique quality of the incident, to compass its particularity, as it were, on another side, and so make his grasp of it firmer. If he imagines that this new aspect is the whole of the incident, he is merely indulging in the simplification of science. An extension of the sensibility has positive literary value only when it is a means towards the fuller penetration of the material of literature, which is the quality of our experience. We may perceive this quality in a new relation ; but this new relation does not supersede the old familiar ones, it only helps to complete them. When a young man of eighteen suddenly develops a passion for exquisite clothes and beautiful ties, to say it is a manifestation of the sex impulse is true; it may indeed be for the biologist a complete truth, but for the writer it is a fragmentary and untransmuted fact. Unless he combines it with a hundred other perceptions—of the boy's desire to be beautiful, to be unobtrusive, to be independent, to be ideal—so that it endorses and intensifies them, he is an inferior man of science instead of (as he often imagines) a superior writer. But if the new faculty of perception is brought into harmony with the old ones, if the new relation in which the quality of experience is perceived does

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complete and not merely supersede the familiar relations, it changes them all ; and when this new complex of perceptions is expressed in a work of literature, the work will be unfamiliar, however great may be its comprehensiveness and truth. Only as we persevere with it and accustom ourselves to the mechanism of the sensibility expressed in it, will its strangeness begin to disappear.

Whatever may have been our final judgment on the strange novel of M. Marcel Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*, which appeared in the year before the war—and the book at least had this obviously in common with a great work of literature, that it lent itself to judgment on many different planes—the persistent element in all our changing opinions was that it marked the arrival of a new sensibility. We were being made aware in new ways, induced to perceive existence in new relations. We seemed to be drawn by a strong and novel enchantment to follow the writer down the long and misty avenues of his consciousness to the discovery of a forgotten childhood. And it was not as though his compelling us to enter into and share the process of his self-exploration was accidental; it was most deliberate. Whatever might be his underlying purpose, M. Proust was not in the least like an artist who should leave all his tentative lines of his discarded sketches upon the paper.

The book opened with a description of the hypothetical writer (who might be more or less than M. Proust himself, but whom we shall for

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brevity's sake identify with him) asleep and waking in the night. In the effort to identify the room in which he is, he passes through a series of memories awakened by the sensation of that effort, and he proceeds to describe what is for him the archetype of that sensation, namely, his anxiety when a child at going to bed without his mother's kiss. From this central point he explores the past and discovers the figure of Swann, a friend of the family, whose presence at dinner it was which prevented him from having at all, or having fully, the kiss without which sleep was impossible. He explores all the avenues of memory until they are exhausted, and he has given us a picture, vague in some places and astonishingly precise in others, of a childish universe in which Swann is the mysterious hero, and his mother and grandmother the guardian angels. That picture, like the vision of the robber Golo which came from the magic-lantern given him to keep his night terrors away, disappears abruptly, and the grown man appears again. He is in his home in Paris, dipping a *madeleine* into a cup of tea. Again the sensation, as he puts the cake into his mouth, is mysteriously familiar. He tries to empty his mind of everything else and to leave his consciousness free for the memory concealed in the sensation to emerge. It returns from the past ; it is the taste of the sop of *madeleine* which his aunt used to give him. He remembers the moment ; he remembers the room ; and gradually he begins to recreate another aspect of the past—his aunt Leonie's house at Combray, Françoise the faithful

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servant, and, above all, his walks “du côté de chez Swann,” on that side of the town where the road skirted Swann’s park. The other side, the other hemisphere of his world, is “du côté de Guermantes,” where the road, never followed to its august destination, leads eventually to the chateau of the Duc de Guermantes, the great notable of the countryside and one of the greatest aristocrats in all France. Most of the boy’s walking is done on Swann’s side, however, though most of his dreaming concerns the other. Nevertheless, “chez Swann” is hardly more accessible than the mysterious Guermantes; for Swann has made a scandalous marriage, since which the boy’s parents have never visited nor allowed him to visit the house. Only one day, when Swann and his family are supposed to be away, he and his father and grandfather take the short cut which runs through Swann’s park; and the boy sees a freckled girl—Swann’s daughter—who pokes out her tongue at him. He also hears her name called out: “Gilberte!”

Again there is an abrupt change in the narrative. The story of Swann’s love for the mistress he has married, Odette de Crécy, is told at length. At first it seems to have no relation to the consciousness of the narrator; it must have taken place before he was even born. But, although the history of Swann and Odette cannot have been obtained by any exploration of the mental *Hinterland* such as yielded the first part of the story, it becomes apparent that the behaviour of Swann’s mind during

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his love affair is governed by the same laws that operated in the writer's rediscovery of his childhood. While Swann's passion for Odette grows, hers for him cools ; but in the midst of his agony his knowledge and memory of their love seems to have dissolved. *Sentit et excruciat* ; but what he has lost he cannot tell until one night he goes to a musical evening in the Faubourg St. Germain. If we had to choose a single episode from M. Proust's enormous book as a sample of the whole, it would be the twenty odd pages describing this evening. In a sense they are too good to be truly representative ; but every quality that can be found in them will be found in a more or less concentrated form throughout the work. But whereas in the rest of the book they are often as it were, held in solution, here they are solidified into crystals. That complete projection of the sensibility which distinguishes great literature is here beautifully accomplished. Since it is impossible to continue the description of M. Proust's book at length, we may try to give an account of this episode.

Swann, the darling of the most exclusive Parisian society, preoccupied with his love for Odette, has given up frequenting it. When he enters Mme. de Ste. Euverte's house on this evening, what was once familiar has become strange to him. He finds himself in an alien universe. Each one of the multitude of lackeys on the stairs, each one, from the first who "semblait témoigner du mépris pour sa personne, et des regards pour son chapeau," appears to him mysterious. At last, with an

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accumulated sense of strangeness, he enters the salon. He sees a number of once familiar friends, like himself, wearing monocles. But to-night their monocles, instead of passing unnoticed, are peculiar : General de Froberville's seems like "a wound that it was glorious to receive, but indecent to display ;" the Marquis de Forestelle's "a superfluous cartilage whose presence was inexplicable and material precious ;" while M. de Palancy's "grosse tête de carpe aux yeux ronds . . . avait l'air de transporter seulement avec lui un fragment accidentel et peut-être purement symbolique de son aquarium." By these curious and striking images we are made to feel how utterly foreign to Swann is become his once habitual environment. He stands near by a fashionable lady, Mme. de Franquetot, and her country cousin, Mme. de Cambremer, and watches their strange contortions to mark their interest in the music. Then the feelings of Mme. de Gallardon, a connection of the Guermantes, are described. Then the young Princesse de Laumes, soon to be the Duchesse de Guermantes, enters. Mme. de Gallardon makes a not too successful attempt to enter into conversation with her and is snubbed. M. de Froberville tries to be introduced to Mme. de Cambremer's daughter-in-law. The Princesse de Laumes shows her contempt for the princes of the Empire, and catches sight of Swann. He refuses her invitation to Guermantes, introduces Froberville to young Mme. de Cambremer, and longs to escape from this place "ou Odette ne viendrait

jamais, où personne, où rien ne la connaissait, d'où elle était entièrement absente."

Suddenly the pianist begins a sonata, and Swann hears a little musical phrase to which he and Odette had listened together in the salon where they used continually to meet.

Et avant que Swann eût eu le temps de comprendre, et de se dire : "C'est la petite phrase de la sonate de Vinteuil, n'écoutons pas !" tous ses souvenirs du temps où Odette était éprise de lui, et qu'il avait réussi jusqu'à ce jour de maintenir invisibles dans les profondeurs de son être, trompés par ce brusque rayon du temps d'amour qu'ils crurent revenu, s'étaient réveillés, et à tire d'aile étaient remontés lui chanter éperdument, sans pitié pour son infortune présente, les refrains oubliés du bonheur.

All the particularity of his love returns with a stab; in a moment of time he relives every incident of it.

Et Swann aperçut, immobile en face de ce bonheur revécu, un malheureux qui lui fit pitié parce qu'il ne le reconnut pas tout de suite, si bien qu'il dut baisser les yeux pour qu'on ne vit pas qu'ils étaient pleins de larmes. C'était lui-même.

Quand il l'eut compris, sa pitié cessa, mais il était jaloux de l'autre lui-même qu'elle avait aimé, il fut jaloux de ceux dont il s'était dit

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souvent sans trop souffrir, "elle les aime peut-être," maintenant qu'il avait échangé l'idée vague d'aimer, dans laquelle il n'y a pas d'amour, contre les pétales du chrysanthème et l' "en tête" de la Maison d'or qui, eux, en étaient pleins. Puis sa souffrance devenant trop vive, il passa sa main sur son front, laissa tomber son monocle, en essuya le verre. Et sans doute s'il s'était vu à ce moment-là, il eut ajouté à la collection de ceux qu'il avait distingués le monocle qu'il déplaçait comme une pensée importune et sur la face embuée duquel, avec un mouchoir, il cherchait à effacer les soucis.

After the episode which culminates in this incident, the narrative returns, apparently for good, to the growing consciousness of the boy. His childish love for Swann's daughter, his visit to the Brittany sea-side at Balbec where he meets another love, Albertine, and one of the less fashionable but authentic Guermantes, Mme. de Villeparisis and her nephew, Robert de Saint-Loup, who becomes his intimate friend ; the death of his grandmother; his entry into the central shrine of the Guermantes by dining with the Duchess herself ; his encounter with another Guermantes, M. de Charlus,—these incidents are the bare skeleton of the three following volumes. But they are treated with such a wealth of psychological detail that a summary of the incidents, however lengthy, could only be misleading.

We may leave aside provisionally the problem of

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M. Proust's deeper intention, confining ourselves to the suggestion that his literary purpose has perhaps changed or developed in the course of his narrative ; for if, as it seems, his main object is to record the growth of a modern consciousness, the brilliant episode of Swann's love affair, which can never have been present to that consciousness, is, in spite of its value in itself, an alien element. Moreover, the long and masterly description of the dinner-party at the Duchesse de Guermantes also exists independently rather than in relation to the young man's consciousness. He was, in fact, present at the dinner-party, but we do not feel his presence there ; we do not perceive the company through his mind. And this objection will hold good still, even if we regard the scheme of the narrative so far as built upon successive contrasts between the dream and the reality of Swann and the dream and the reality of Guermantes. M. Proust seems at times to waver undecided between the psychological history of a modern mentality and an anatomy of modern society.

Nevertheless, it is better to admit that on a canvas so large a strict subordination of every part to the literary purpose of the whole is not to be expected. We are conscious that a single sensibility pervades all the parts, even though the power of projecting it so completely as in the episodes of the musical evening and the death of the grandmother is intermittent. And this sensibility is our chief concern. The underlying motive which animates, or law which governs it, is that which appears so

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plainly in the first volume—the dependence of memory and mental life as a whole upon association. Without the taste of *madeleine*, the boy's past at Combray, without the *petite phrase*, Swann's knowledge of the realities of his love for Odette, would have been sunk in the dark backward and abysm of time. This psychological fact at once governs the conduct of the narrative itself in so far as it is presented in terms of a single consciousness, and determines the conduct of the various characters who appear in it. More than this, the act of penetrating through some present circumstances to a fragment of past experience which it seems to hold strangely concealed behind it, is represented as a consummation of personality. To enter into complete possession of the past by means of such present circumstances is to possess oneself wholly; they are, M. Proust says, the door that opens upon *la vraie vie*. This conviction of the writer can be interpreted in two ways, according as we regard the whole narrative as the history of the consciousness of a writer, or as the development of an extreme but none the less typical modern mind. In one of the few indications of his own plan, M. Proust seems to declare that his aim is to describe the evolution of a literary sensibility.

Si en descendant l'escalier je ravivais les soirs de Doncières, quand nous fûmes arrivés dans la rue brusquement, la nuit presque complète où le brouillard semblait avoir éteint les reverberes, qu'on ne distinguait, bien faibles, que de tout

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près, me ramena à je ne sais quelle arrivée le soir à Combray, quand la ville n'était encore éclairée que de loin en loin, et qu'on y tâtonnait dans une obscurité humide, tiède et sainte de crèche, à peine étoilée ça et là d'un lumignon qui ne brillait plus qu'un cierge. Entre cette année d'ailleurs incertaine de Combray et les soirs à Rivebelle revus tout à l'heure au-dessus des rideaux, quelles différences ! J'éprouvais à les percevoir un enthousiasme qui aurait pu être fécond si j'étais resté seul et m'aurait évité ainsi le détour de bien des années inutiles par lesquelles j'allais encore passer avant que se déclarât *la vocation invisible dont cette ouvrage est l'histoire*.

On the other hand, the description of his vain endeavour to seize the significance of three strange-familiar trees seen while driving in Mme. de Villeparisis' carriage at Balbec suggests a larger scope to this activity of the mind.

Ce plaisir (the delight of penetrating their significance) dont l'objet n'était que pressenti, que j'avais à créer moi-même, je ne l'éprouvais que de rares fois, mais à chacune d'elles il me semblait que les choses qui s'étaient passées dans l'intervalle n'avaient guère d'importance et qu'en m'attachant à sa seule réalité je pourrais enfin commencer une vraie vie. . . . Je vis les arbres s'éloigner en agitant leurs bras désespérés, semblant me dire : Ce que tu n'apprends pas de nous aujourd'hui tu ne le sauras jamais.

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Si tu nous laisses retomber au fond de ce chemin d'ou nous cherchions nous hisser jusqu'à toi, toute une partie de toi-même que nous t'apportions tombera pour jamais au néant. En effet, si dans la suite je retrouvai le genre de plaisir et d'inquiétude que je venais de sentir encore une fois, et si un soir—trop tard, mais pour toujours —je m'attachai à lui, de ces arbres eux-mêmes en revanche je ne sus jamais ce qu'ils avaient voulu m'apporter ni où je les avais vus. Et quand la voiture ayant bifurqué, je leur tournai le dos et cessai de les voir . . . j'étais triste comme si je venais de perdre un ami, de mourir à moi-même, de renier un mort ou de méconnaître un Dieu.

Perhaps we may find in the reference to the final and enduring penetration of the hidden reality a hint of the conclusion of the book considered as the history of an "invisible vocation." It suggests that at the end we shall find the writer, deliberately, and with all the resources of his will, concentrating upon that very sensation of reminiscence, the malaise at night in bed, with which *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* opens. Such a doubling of the consciousness upon itself would make a fittingly subtle finale to the subtlest of all modern psychological fictions, and present us at the last with a book which would be in essentials the story of its own creation. But for the moment it is sufficient to regard the writer's conviction of the supreme importance of these acts of penetration as dictated

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by the knowledge of his own vocation, as a declaration that the *vraie vie* is that to which the intuition of the writer has access, and rather as a deliberate placing of the literary consciousness at the summit of the mental hierarchy than an assertion that complete possession of the self by this means is the highest moral end, the most perfect ascēsis, for all human beings.

What M. Proust undoubtedly does, however, is to represent this process of association as dominant in the mental lives of all men who can be said to live at all. A writer's exclusive preoccupation with it is only a completer realisation of a tendency which distinguishes the higher grades of consciousness. It determines, for instance, Swann's attitude to Odette, and his decision to marry her really rests upon it. In more general terms, M. Proust regards the life of man as a perpetual effort to penetrate an unknown,—the mind of the woman he loves, the friend he admires, the society with which he is acquainted. This desire is, indeed, the very condition of love. “*Que nous croyions qu'un être participe à une vie inconnue où son amour nous ferait pénétrer, c'est de tout ce qu'exige l'amour pour naître, ce à quoi il tient le plus.*” But this desire to penetrate the unknown of others is never satisfied. We live in perpetual illusion ; the imagined friend, the imagined lover, the imagined society, the imagined reality, are never real. Suddenly, by a devious way, we hear of something said or done which cannot enter into our picture: we are shocked and pained, then we rebuild another

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picture, no less illusory, and imagine that this at least is true. This recurrent theme of perpetual disillusion, of impotent encounter with the unknown, may be called the philosophical background of the book, and from this angle we might regard it as a philosophical justification of the art of writing, presented through the history of a consciousness. For as the growing man turns away from the continual disillusion which is the only result of his attempt to penetrate the reality beyond himself, he more clearly sees that the only reality he can hope to master is his own experience. Thus to enter into complete possession of the past by the method of which *Du Côté de chez Swann* is an example is presented not only as the goal to which an "invisible vocation" was calling a particular person, but in fact also as the highest end of man, *la vraie vie* indeed. In so far as literature is based upon that method of evoking the past through an associated symbol (and it certainly is one of the chief elements in literary creation) it is, according to this underlying philosophy, the supreme activity of life.

This concealed motive it is which differentiates M. Proust's book from all that have gone before. The metaphysician might call it the history of a solipsist. But such a definition would be as misleading as all other attempts to find a philosophical definition for a particular work of literature. For, though M. Proust is in a sense applying a theory to experience, he is doing so by the strikingly novel method of describing the process by which

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the theory was gradually and inevitably formed in the consciousness which applies it. If, therefore, M. Proust's book ends, as we believe it will end, in its own beginning, it will have a unity—in spite of the apparent discrepancy of certain of the parts—of a kind which has never been achieved in a work of literature before : it will be the first book in the world that has been the psychological history of its own creation, and a philosophical justification of its own necessity.¹ It will belong in this respect to new order of literature. And that is what we already vaguely feel as we read it. It is something more than a book in an unfamiliar language, more than a fiction of greater psychological subtlety than we are accustomed to. For better or worse, it marks the emergence of a new kind, the arrival of a new sensibility.

That is its uncommon significance. To find an approximate parallel in the history of modern literature we should probably have to go back to Rousseau. There we should discover the paradox of a man not primarily a literary artist whose work revolutionised the literature of the next hundred years, M. Proust likewise is not primarily a literary artist. Nothing could be more significant than the length of the process of his finding his "invisible vocation." Like Rousseau, he is ultimately compelled to writing as a satisfaction for his sensibility. The chief point of difference is that where Rousseau was compelled to express his

¹ This essay was written in 1921. There is now, also, no hope either of proving or confuting the prophecy.

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sensibility upon alien themes, M. Proust has been in the privileged position of one who could afford to wait for the truly inevitable occasion. Still, the only work of literature with which *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* could profitably be compared is the *Confessions of Jean-Jacques*. There is a real likeness between the driving impulses at work in these books, and a careful comparison might enable us to determine the more important differences between the new sensibility of the eighteenth, and the new sensibility of the twentieth century. At all events, a century of science has passed between. M. Proust is not preoccupied with finding God, but with finding *la vraie vie*, though a previous quotation shows that where Rousseau always did, he sometimes does identify them. But more apparently still, a century of scientific psychology, of astronomical physics, of the biology of Natural Selection, has intervened. The last shreds of anthropocentrism have been worn away. Where Rousseau felt his own isolation and was tormented by the discrepancy between his dream and the reality, and could not reconcile himself to his isolation or his torment, M. Proust can. He accepts these conditions, he formulates them as an actual law of human existence ; and the acceptance has been incorporated into the very mechanism of his sensibility. He discerns in the world that which he feels in himself ; he is a Rousseau to whom some of the hidden causes of his perplexity have been made plain.

And the detailed knowledge of a century of

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applied science is at his fingers' ends to help him refine and express his sensibility. How many times does he use the simile of a camera to make more apparent the working of two planes of consciousness ! "Ce qu'on prend en présence de l'être aimé n'est un cliché négatif, on le développe plus tard." By that means he expresses in a sentence a truth which lies behind a whole section of the fifth volume, "*Les Intermittences du Cœur*," where for the first time realising the loss of his beloved grandmother, months after her death, the young man learns that the uniqueness of our most precious experience eludes us till the opportunity of it is lost for ever. Again, when the boy, occupied with the anxiety of obtaining his mother's kiss, waits nervously at the dinner table— "comme un malade, grâce à un anesthésique, assiste avec pleine lucidité à l'opération qu'on pratique sur lui, mais sans rien sentir, je pouvais me réciter des vers que j'aimais ou observer les efforts que mon grand'père faisait pour parler à Swann du duc d'Audiffret-Pasquier, sans que les premiers me fissent éprouver aucune émotion, les seconds aucune gaîté." And on the same occasion, having to take the kiss in public, he had not even the time or the freedom of mind necessary "pour porter à ce que je faisais cette attention des maniaques qui s'efforcent de ne pas penser à autre chose pendant qu'ils ferment une porte, pour pouvoir, quand l'incertitude maladive leur revient, lui opposer victorieusement le souvenir du moment où ils l'ont fermée." And for a final example we may choose

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the part played by the Duchesse de Guermantes' tree, which needs to be fertilised by an insect, in the explication of the psychology of the closing pages of *Du Côté de Guermantes*, and the writer's declaration : " Mes réflexions avaient suivi une pente que je décrirai plus tard et j'avais déjà tiré de la ruse apparente de fleurs une conséquence sur toute une partie inconsciente de l'œuvre littéraire." Such are some of the typical contributions of the science of the nineteenth century towards the expression of a sensibility shaped by its larger knowledge.

But in endeavouring to analyse the singular impression which M. Proust's work makes upon us and to isolate the elements which produce the effect of novelty, in trying to investigate and assess its deeply-rooted originality, we are in danger of neglecting the more obvious qualities of a book which exhibits at least as many beauties as it conceals. It needs no second reading to appreciate the subtlety of psychological observation, the ironic detachment of the writer's vision of high Parisian society. If the dinner-party at the Guermantes is a masterpiece in a not wholly unfamiliar genre, in the description of the musical evening at Mme. de Ste. Euverte's the same lucid irony is perceptibly lifted to a higher plane and made to subserve a complex emotional effect. And though the biting wit which flashes home again and again through the narrative of *Du Côté de Guermantes* is of the very highest order in its kind, though the semi-satirical portrait of the *bien pensant* ambassador,

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M. de Norpois, at the beginning of *À l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles* is perfect, they yield in impressiveness to the certainty of the single touch with which in the description of the grandmother's illness, M. Proust sounds the note of the tragedy of death. When the grandmother has had a paralytic stroke in the Champs Elysées, and the boy suddenly sees "son chapeau, son visage, son manteau dérangés par la main de l'ange invisible avec lequel elle avait lutté," we feel we are in the presence of a great writer indeed. And besides the command of tragic simplicity and wit, M. Proust has also the gift of humour. To appreciate this picture of life in the kitchen it is necessary to know that it was an established convention that the servants should not be disturbed at their lunch.

Déjà depuis un quart d'heure, ma mère qui n'usait probablement pas des mêmes mesures que Françoise pour apprécier la longueur du déjeuner de celle-ci, disait :

"Mais qu'est-ce qu'ils peuvent bien faire, voilà plus de deux heures qu'ils sont à table."

Et elle sonnait timidement trois ou quatre fois. Françoise, son valet de pied, le maître d'hôtel entendaient les coups de sonnette comme un appel et sans songer à venir, mais pourtant comme les premiers sons des instruments qui s'accordent quand un concert va bientôt recommencer et qu'on sent qu'il n'y aura plus que quelques minutes d'entr'acte. Aussi quand les coups commençant à se répéter et à devenir

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plus insistants, nos domestiques se mettaient à y prendre garde et estimant qu'ils n'avaient plus beaucoup de temps devant eux et que la reprise du travail était proche, à un tintement de sonnette un peu plus sonore que les autres, ils poussaient un soupir et prenant leur parti, le valet de pied descendait fumer une cigarette devant la porte, Françoise, après quelques reflexions sur nous, telles que "ils ont sûrement la bougeotte," montait ranger ses affaires dans son sixième, et le maître d'hôtel ayant été chercher du papier à lettres dans ma chambre expédiait rapidement sa correspondance privée.

But it is not these qualities, rare and valuable as they are, which make *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* one of the most significant of contemporary works of literature. They are precious qualities, but they are in a sense superficial, and they might be outweighed by the undoubted obscurity, the awkward complication of language, in large portions of the book. It is something much more than a dark narrative with frequent gleams of beauty ; it is a book with at least one of the qualities of permanence, an animating soul. It is maintained by a high and subtle purpose, informed by a view of life as a whole, and because this secret fire glows steadily within it, we feel the radiance through the most forbidding pages long before we are able to detect its source. One consequence of this is that though M. Proust's language is sometimes alembicated to a point of grotesqueness, he has

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style ; we might more exactly apply to him a phrase which he himself has aptly used of a great predecessor, Stendhal, and say that his work has *la grande ossature du style*, a thing of infinitely more importance than limpidity or beauty in the detail of expression. M. Proust's style, in this larger meaning, is as new and original as is the sensibility to which it owes its being.

[July, 1921.]

The Break-up of the Novel

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The Novel? Perhaps it is almost as pure an abstraction as *The Poem*. And surely, if we were to attempt, by a process of induction, to discover the common element in all the works which have passed under that name during two centuries, we should be left with something which, though by no means an abstraction, would be far from satisfying the ideal demands of the name, *The Novel*. The residue in our hands would be *The Story*. A novel is a story in prose. *The Novel* should therefore be *The Story*. We are not much advanced.

And yet the simple change of the article has worked a minor miracle. Even if *The Story* is only the most delightful story, we find ourselves appealing to a new standard of judgment. For what is it delights us in a story? If we are children, its mere unexpectedness, no doubt, and in so far as we remain children in our later years, its power to afford us relaxation from the stress of practical life. To that attitude of mind a story is a game, a simple game or a game with intricate rules, hide-and-seek or a chess problem, fairy tale or detective story, but a thing whose import is completely closed within itself, a world which we enter, if we can, chiefly for the purpose of forgetting that acts have consequences. But a moment comes—it is the moment when we begin to talk of *The Novel*—

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when we make quite other demands upon it. We ask that the game should not be an interlude in our life, but a significant part of it. We begin by asking that the story should, in the simplest fashion, teach us something, first, perhaps, that it should justify our notions of right and wrong, then that it should reveal to us exacter and more subtle ideas of good and evil. We ask that the story should be real and like life, and we pass from demanding that the story should reflect our own conception of life to an attitude of expectation that it will throw a new illumination on to life.

The story, which began as a game and remains a game for many, becomes for others a high and serious art. The two phases co-exist, and even to-day criticism hovers uneasily between the two conceptions. It is aware of two standards of judgment, and is uncertain which to apply. And there is some reason for the hesitation. For, though it seems that we can make a clean logical cut between the story-interest and the significance of the novel, as soon as we attempt to apply the knife we find we are operating upon a living and organic whole. The novel is something greater than its story indeed, but can the greater thing exist without the lesser? Is not the story the skeleton which holds the flesh and blood and tissue of the novel together? Revolving some such unanswered question in its mind, criticism confronts the novel to-day.

But, as usual, creation marches in advance of criticism. While the critic is trying to make up his mind about the terms of the ultimatum he will

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present to the novelist, the novelist takes the initiative and presents him with a *fait accompli*. He annihilates the story.

The beginning of the process which has ended in the abolition of the story may be traced back far into the nineteenth century. With the end of the early Romantic movement came the decay of the conception that the novelist is primarily a teller of tales. By the middle of the century, the novelist who took himself seriously, accepted, with individual interpretations, the principle that his art consisted in a faithful representation of life. The novelist was the scribe, and life dictated to him. Though many of the realists—Flaubert in particular—felt uneasily that there was something inadequate in this mechanical conception, it was dominant in the West for a generation. The most original novelists endeavoured to vary the monotony of their task by introducing intricate considerations of form. Flaubert and Henry James devised for themselves subtle problems concerning the angle of presentation and the identity of the hypothetical consciousness to which the events of the fiction were present. They made the writing of novels an infinitely subtle craft, and they increased its prestige and mystery. For many years, indeed to within the last decade, their principles and subtleties were regarded with an awful reverence. They were the *nec plus ultra* of the novel.

Suddenly—it is hard to say exactly when, but we can safely date the revolution within the present century—it began to be felt that while most of the

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modern novelists of the West had been circling in a technical labyrinth, in Russia had appeared two novelists at least whose work, composed with but the faintest attention to these problems of the craft, completely overshadowed that of their Western contemporaries. I well remember the appearance in *The English Review* of 1912 of Mr. Arnold Bennett's astonished confession on reading Mrs. Garnett's then new translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*. With his usual honesty, Mr. Bennett, who had painfully formed himself in the school of Flaubert, acknowledged that Dostoevsky was a master "impatient of a minor perfection," and that this impatience made not the slightest difference to his greatness. The confession that the technical perfection of a Flaubert or a James was, after all, only "a minor perfection" itself marked a minor revolution in the history of modern criticism of the novel. It began to be realised that the method of saying it was little compared to the significance of the thing said. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky had been saying tremendous things, while the novelists of the West had been busy with some private conception of "art." One immediate effect of this shock to accepted critical notions was that Mr. Thomas Hardy began to emerge from the comparative obscurity to which criticism had relegated him. After regarding him as an uncouth teller of country tragedies, artistically far less important than James or Meredith, and, of course, not to be named in a breath with Flaubert, the novelists and critics who had been under the

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technical spell awoke to discover that he was the only novelist we possessed of a magnitude remotely comparable with that of the Russians.

When the commotion had subsided a little, and the attempt began to make an instinctive feeling articulate, it was decided that there were two qualities which distinguished the "great" novelist. He expressed a philosophy of life ; and he was formless. The first of these propositions, if carefully interpreted, is true; the second is not. The great Russian novelists have not the formal perfection of Flaubert and James, simply because it was of no conceivable use to them ; but they have a form of their own. Nevertheless the young novelists of the period, imagining that formlessness was in itself a virtue, poured volumes of diluted autobiography into the lap of a patient world. The philosophy of life was rather more difficult. The more enterprising put moral mottoes on their title pages and hoped for the best. The boldest introduced a little local colour in the shape of perambulatory characters of no fixed abode, who uttered sentiments of nihilism and world-weariness when nothing else was doing.

These outbreaks of "the Russian influence" in English fiction have a merely local interest ; but they serve to show into what a condition of ignorance and inanition English fiction fell when the dubious influence of Flaubert and James, of "style," was removed. After Mr. Wells, Mr. Conrad, and Mr. Bennett, there was nothing except Mr. D. H. Lawrence. It looked as though England might

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fall out of the running altogether. And France was in no better case. MM. Bourget and Barrès had become deliberately parochial ; Anatole France alone remained. There was nothing after him. For in French literature a similar ignorant attempt to follow the lead of the Russians had been equally unfortunate. In France it was accepted (largely on the "expert" assurance of Melchior de Vogüé) that the secret of Russian literature was "the religion of pity." A whole school of young French novelists, with Romain Rolland and Charles-Louis Philippe at their head, began to be pitiful. This sentimental weakling expired shortly before the war. The ponderous epitaph "Unanimism" is written on its tomb.

At that moment the disorientation of the novel was complete. The Russians had ruined it by revealing its enormous potentialities. The vista was too big ; instead of exhilarating, it terrified. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy had exploded the novel, and a whole generation of promising young souls in England and France lay buried under the ruins, whence they have emerged, wise and sad, to settle down to the respectable business of telling stories for library subscribers. The novel as a serious art had nothing to hope or fear from them. Indeed, it would not be worth while to chronicle their history were it not that a historical retrospect of their failure gives the emphasis of contrast to a new vitality.

In the years 1913-1914 three significant books, calling themselves novels, made an unobtrusive and independent appearance. In France, Marcel

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Proust published *Du Côté de chez Swann*, in America, the Irishman, James Joyce, published *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in England, Dorothy Richardson published *Pointed Roofs*. These books had points of outward resemblance. Each was in itself incomplete, a foretaste of sequels to come. Each was autobiographical and, within the necessary limits of individuality, autobiographical in the same new and peculiar fashion. They were attempts to record immediately the growth of a consciousness. Immediately ; without any effort at mediation by means of an interposed plot or story. All three authors were trying to present the content of their consciousness as it was before it had been reshaped in obedience to the demands of practical life ; they were exploring the strange limbo where experiences once conscious fade into unconsciousness. The method of Marcel Proust was the most subtle in that he established as the starting point of his book the level of consciousness from which the exploration actually began. He presented the process as well as the results of his exploration of the unconscious memory. In the first pages of his book he described how he concentrated upon a vaguely remembered feeling of past malaise, which he experienced in waking at night and trying to establish the identity of his room. It was a particular form of the familiar feeling : "I have felt this, been here, seen this, somewhere, somehow, before." We might almost say that Marcel Proust gives us an account of his technique in penetrating such a sensation and

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gradually dragging up to the surface of full consciousness forgotten but decisive experiences.

This singularity of Marcel Proust's approach—implied in the general title, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*—involving as it does a perpetual reference to the present adult consciousness of the author, is important. It gives a peculiarly French sense of control to his whole endeavour, and a valuable logical (or psychological) completeness to his work, in which is unfolded the process by which first a distinct and finally a supreme importance came to be attached to these presentiments of past experience. They are the precious moments of existence ; they hold the secret of life. The growth of this conviction is the vital principle of Marcel Proust's book. The conviction becomes more immediate, the sense of obligation to devote himself to penetrating these moments more urgent, so that, even though the work is still unfinished, we can already see that the end will come when this necessity becomes fully conscious and ineluctable—an end strictly and necessarily identical with the beginning. *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is at once a philosophical justification of its own existence and the history of its own creation.

That internal completeness is peculiar to Marcel Proust, and it gives him the position of conscious philosopher of a literary impulse which arose, quite independently, in two other minds at the same moment. Simply because it is the most conscious, Marcel Proust's effort subsumes those of James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson, though

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it is not for that reason more important than they. But common to them all is an insistence upon the immediate consciousness as reality. In Miss Richardson this insistence is probably instinctive and irrational ; it has a distinctively feminine tinge. In James Joyce it is certainly deliberate, but less deliberate than in Marcel Proust. But the differences in conscious intention are unimportant compared with the similarity of the impulse.

To discover the origin of the impulse we should have to consider the history of the human consciousness, in its double form of sensibility and intelligence, from Rousseau through the nineteenth century. There we find the instinctive individualism of the artistic sensibility more and more exasperated by the sense that society in its new demoplutocratic form had neither room nor respect for such an unprofitable activity of the human spirit as art. This increase of instinctive individualism received a rational reinforcement from the advance of science. The anthropocentric conception of the universe was finally abandoned, and an indifferent universe lent its weight to a hostile society in thrusting back the individual upon himself.

The extreme and deliberate subjectivism of the latest developments of the novel is the culmination of Rousseauism. Rousseau's social indifference permitted him to proclaim the intoxicating but misleading gospel that all men are spiritually equal, and the social consequences of that doctrine have made his descendants outlaws. They have accepted their destiny with a certain bravado, and have come

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to believe that social isolation is an eternal condition of artistic eminence. The conception of the artist as a superman is now more than a century old. The examples of Chateaubriand, Byron, Hugo, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, have given it the force of tradition, even of an absolute law. And science, by its necessary insistence on a fundamental materialism, has given the law a double sanction. It is not for us to lament over this evolution; at most we may have to consider whether a reaction against it is desirable, or possible, or probable. The important thing is to know where we are.

This movement towards artistic subjectivism has affected all the arts; but it is most obvious in prose fiction. The aim of the characteristic modern novelist—we are speaking only of those who consider the novel as a medium of expression which can satisfy the highest demands of the soul—is the presentation of his immediate consciousness. This alone is true, he believes; this alone is valuable, or at any rate, this alone has the chance of being of some permanent value. But the driving impulse is the demand for truth. A complete and fearless exploration of the self reduces the chance of self-deception to a minimum. To a generation before all things fearful of self-delusion, the persuasion is of vital importance. And is he not merely carrying to its logical outcome the practice of all the great novelists of the past? They endure in so far as they have rendered their own consciousness of life. Not the stories they told but the comprehensive attitude to life embodied in their stories

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makes them important to us to-day. Then why not abolish the mechanism of the story completely, if the end to which it is a means can be achieved without it? And there is more than this. A story seems necessarily to involve a falsification, a distortion of the reality. Life does not shape itself into stories ; much less does an individual and unique consciousness lend itself to complete expression by means of an invented plot. Let us do away with this illusory objectivity, this imposition of completeness and order upon the incomplete and chaotic. All that we can know is our own experience, and the closer we keep to the immediate quality of that experience, the nearer shall we be to truth.

Such are the arguments, conscious or unconscious, upon which the subjective movement in modern fiction depends. They are not final, but they are at least persuasive ; and they are serious enough to show that the tendency which they support is more than a puerile esotericism. They remove all cause for wonder that many of the most gifted writers of the present generation have embraced it.

Nevertheless, the desire of the creative writer for objectivity cannot always be so easily suppressed. We have to take count of another movement, which may be described as an attempt, again no doubt not wholly conscious, to reconcile subjectivism with objectivity. To give it a label we may call it the Tchehov tendency, although in fact it seems to have originated with Baudelaire's *Prose Poems*. But Baudelaire had no influence upon Tchehov, the direction of whose

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genius was finally determined, I believe, by the reading of Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilyitch*. Like the subjectivists, Tchehov was obsessed by a passion for truth; like them, he believed that the only reality was the individual consciousness ; like them, he had conceived a deep mistrust of the machine of story. But in a higher degree than they, he possessed the purely creative genius of the writer, which is an instinct for objectivity and concreteness. He reconciled the two conflicting impulses in an individual creation. The short story of Tchehov was an innovation in literature. The immediate consciousness remains the criterion, and the method is based on a selection of those glimpses of the reality which in themselves possess a peculiar vividness, and by virtue of this vividness appear to have a peculiar significance. Baudelaire, who had practised the method with brilliant success, though on a simpler scale, in some of his *Prose Poems*, defined the principle in words which are worth repeating. "Dans certains états de l'âme presque surnaturels," he said, "la profondeur de la vie toute entière se révèle dans le spectacle, si ordinaire qu'il soit, qu'on a sous les yeux. Il en devient le symbole." This certainty that a fragment of experience is symbolic of the whole is subjective and immediate. The artist can attempt to present it without any misgivings about self-delusion or distortion. It was so ; therefore it is true. Presented, the episode is objective, but its validity arises from an immediate intuition. To present such episodes with a minimum of

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rearrangement, as far as possible to eliminate the mechanism of invented story, was Tchehov's aim. This is not to suggest that Tchehov invented nothing; but his constant effort was to reduce the part of invention. He strove rather to link moments of perception, than to expand the perception by invention. And certainly the impressive originality of his work lay in the closeness of his fidelity to what we feel was his immediate experience.

It was impossible for Tchehov, therefore, to write anything which could be reasonably given the name of a novel. Not, as some have said, because his constructive power was defective, but simply because the effort would have involved too wide a departure from the vivid moments of his own consciousness. He would have seemed to himself like the constructor of a metaphysical system, who leaves the solid ground of truth for cloudland. His feet once lifted from the firm earth, the very motive for flight would have failed him. What was the good of yet another attempt to impose finality upon the incessant?

But the method persists in modern fiction as the internal antithesis to complete subjectivism. The most finished modern example is to be found in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield. The finest stories in *Bliss* and the *Garden Party* adhere closely to the Tchehov formula. But to speak of a formula is misleading. It is quite impossible to imitate, almost impossible to be influenced by a method so completely intuitive as Tchehov's. It is simply that Katherine Mansfield is a similar

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phenomenon : her work is of the same kind as Tchehov's, and precisely because it is of the same kind it is utterly different from his.

The two significant methods in the most modern fiction are, on the one hand, the presentation of a consciousness, on the other, the presentation of the vivid moments of a consciousness. Both are essentially subjective. They differ, however, in this important particular that, whereas the subjectivist novelists seem to be chiefly moved by a desire to express the truth alone, the story-writers aim at an *art* which is compatible with the truth. The most obvious consequence is that the second are much more easily comprehensible than the first, because they speak a universal language. A writer who presents an object perceived, interests us immediately, because there is common ground between his perceptions and our own. It is also easier for us to feel the individual quality of such a writer's consciousness than it is to disentangle it from the work of a writer who is busy in insisting upon the nature of his consciousness. In a short story by Tchehov or Katherine Mansfield it is as though an intense beam of peculiar light were cast upon a fragment of reality. By watching the objects revealed by it, we can tell the colour of the light far more easily than we could if the colour were described to us : above all, because we are made sensible of the light at the moment when it is, or is felt by the writer, to be more illuminating than the ordinary light—"dans certains états de l'âme presque *surnaturels*."

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On the other hand, an extreme subjectivism, without the control of this intuitive selection, tends to become incomprehensible. A consciousness is a flux, it needs to be crystallised about some foreign object to have an intelligible shape. Marcel Proust's historical and philosophical preoccupations supply such a thread ; but even he can be excessively tedious when his grasp on the external world is slackened. Miss Richardson can be as tiring as a twenty-four hour cinematograph without interval or plot. And in *Ulysses*, James Joyce at times carries his effort of analysis to such lengths as to become as difficult as a message in code of which half the key has been lost. The process of consciousness has, indeed, a fatal fascination for him, and he perceptibly diminishes the significance of two such splendidly conceived (or observed) characters as Leopold and Marion Bloom by his inability to stop recording their processes of mind. Nevertheless, we must freely admit that *Ulysses* is a magnificent attempt by an extreme subjectivist to overcome the formlessness into which the method must so easily degenerate. The narrative, more or less remotely based upon the *Odyssey*, is enclosed within the limits of a day in Dublin twenty years ago. All the characters who come into contact with the hero's consciousness have a place in it, and the minds of two of them are submitted to the same exhaustive analysis as his own. But in spite of this considerable degree of objectivity, a complete and satisfying clarity is seldom attained. The objective is chiefly an excuse for another plunge into

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subjectivity, and we become weary of the effort to follow the processes of three different minds. For us they are exhausted long before Mr. Joyce has done with them. We long to escape from this incessant web of consciousness in which we are everywhere entangled, and to be allowed to trust to the revelation of the object. But we are forbidden. Either the consciousness of Bloom-Ulysses, or of Marion-Penelope, or of Mr. Joyce in his avatar as Stephen Dedalus-Telemachus, or in his apotheosis as the demiurge of the book itself, is ever before us to mist and complicate the thing we desire to see. Mr. Joyce is determined to give us everything, by devious and supersubtle ways : a day of human existence, with all its heritage of the past, its dreams of the future, shall be completely explored.

Ulysses is a work of genius; but in spite of its objective moments, it is also a *reductio ad absurdum* of subjectivism. It is the triumph of the desire to discover the truth over the desire to communicate that which is felt as truth. This desire to communicate is, so far as we can see, essential to literature, though not to genius; nor is it by any means necessary that a perceived truth should be communicated. But literature is, almost by definition, a communication of intuitions; and they can only be communicated in terms of a generally perceived reality. It is as though the external world were a common language which the writer speaks with new inflections and accents, giving new life to the old, and revealing a hidden significance in the

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familiar. The writer's duty is to make the approach to his intuitions and sentiments as simple as possible, and he does this by shaping the common reality in accordance with them, so that the reality becomes the symbol of his profoundest certainties.

In this process, Mr. Joyce is only casually interested. Rather than sacrifice one atom of his truth of detail, he is arcane and incomprehensible; and it is impossible not to feel he enjoys his own mysteriousness. It gives some kind of fillip to his self-engrossment. *Ulysses* contains many scattered patches of surprising beauty, and at least one sustained passage of metaphysical comedy which justifies us in at least comparing his powers of intellectual imagination with those of Goethe and Dostoevsky, but as a whole we must consider it a gigantic aberration, a colossal waste of genius, the last extravagance of romanticism. Whether the dangers of the romantic apotheosis of *The Artist*, the spiritual outlaw who is glorified by his rejection of all social obligations, even to the last obligation of being comprehensible, needed this ocular demonstration, we cannot tell ; but now that we have it we can be grateful for it. The many-minded, the much-wandering Ulysses has ended his voyages, by stranding his ship at the side of the sea. It is not, as some timid spirits seem to fear, a danger to navigation ; it is a valuable sea-mark which will warn future voyagers of the futility of no-compromise.

For the art of literature is based upon a compromise. The writer who does not accept the condition may be a man of genius, but he is an

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imperfect writer. As Goethe said, the writer who writes without the conviction that he will have a million readers has mistaken his vocation. Moreover, it is much easier to be complicated than to be simple, to be mysterious than to be intelligible. The great writer is the man who, without betraying the complexity of his own consciousness, insists on discovering a means of expressing his consciousness in relatively simple terms. It is easy to plunge into the strangest depths of individual sensation :

sed revocare gradum, superasque evadere ad
auras
hoc opus, hic labor est.

And this toil, this labour, is vital to literature. Only when it has been faced and accomplished does a book possess the mysterious quality in virtue of which we pronounce it a masterpiece, namely, that it gives delight at every level of apprehension. A truly great novel is a tale to the simple, a parable to the wise, and a direct revelation of reality in the light of a unique consciousness to the man who has made it part of his being.

For this reason it seems that the story is necessary to the novel. It is the means by which the novelist completely projects and embodies his own emotional attitude to life. It is the comprehensible symbol which is the condition of lucidity. Nevertheless, as the complexity of the modern consciousness increases, it is inevitable that the traditional form of story, the simple invented sequence of act

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and consequence, should appear inadequate to a condition of which a shrinking mistrust of action is one of the most constant elements. The problem that Shakespeare tried to solve when he wrote *Hamlet* still rises before the modern novelist. And there is a further complication which can hardly have been present to Shakespeare's mind. After the nineteenth century it is impossible for the serious writer of fiction to be wholly immune from the influence of a scientific standard of truth. The bold abbreviations of heroic fable are not for him ; the comfortable finalities of "a good plot," with its suicides and deaths and unchallengeable felicities, are psychologically impossible. He envies the men of old who could invoke their aid with such sublime nonchalance, but he dare not, he cannot imitate them. He is preoccupied with a loyalty to the real, and he satisfies it, as we have seen, either by a surrender to the movement of his own consciousness, or by an instructive insistence upon the moment when the web of consciousness is pierced by the significant intrusion of the real world.

Thus we have, in modern fiction, the striking antithesis between the big books and the little ones, corresponding to the complete history of a consciousness and its most objective moments. In the big books there are moments which have the vividness of the little ones, because they have the same basis of immediately perceived reality. But in the big books these moments are quickly swallowed up in the analytic meanderings of the narrative as a whole. For hours the mist drags slowly over

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the mountain side. Suddenly, there is a burst of blue sky, a streaming sun, and the trees, the valley, the river, and the mountain tops shine for a moment with miraculous brilliance. Then the mist closes down once more. In the little books we have a sequence of those visions with no intervening mists. But even in them the shining light cannot be steadily maintained ; its brilliance depends upon its suddenness, upon an absorption of the whole consciousness by the apparition of reality, a condition which, however frequent in a writer of genius, is still an intermittent one. He can hardly give us a continuous vision at the same degree of illumination ; at most, he gives us a sequence of detached visions.

Therefore we may speak, without rhetoric, of the break-up of the novel. We do not have to deplore the dissolution. Obviously we are in a period of transition, in which new elements are being gathered together for a more perfect artistic realisation in the future. New standards of truth, new standards of brilliance and directness in presentation are being introduced into fiction. When they have been absorbed, the art of the novel will obey its own internal law as an art of literature, and evolve towards a new combination of lucidity and comprehensiveness. At present the comprehensiveness is massed on one side and the lucidity upon the other of the small band of important writers of modern fiction. No single writer has been big enough to make the creative synthesis, so that the only possible synthesis at

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this moment is the critical one. But we do not doubt that the creative synthesis will be made. It may be that the divided elements will unite only to divide again into two separate literary achievements. There is a portion of *Ulysses* where Mr. Joyce shows that the strongest part of his talent is magnificently comic.

Satirical Aristophanic comedy is the true satisfaction of exasperation. There never was such an exasperated age as this in which a universal materialism is opposed by a universal hypersensitiveness. Exasperation is continually manifest as a disturbing influence in the work of such writers of English as Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Eliot, Mr. Wyndham Lewis, Mr. Huxley, and above all, Mr. Joyce himself; in many of the modern Parisians, like Paul Morand and Louis Aragon; in a Russian like Bunin. Bunin's *The Gentleman from San Francisco*, comes nearest to giving complete artistic expression to this exasperation; but his manner is too minatory and apocalyptic. The liberation of Aristophanic comedy is its ideal expression.¹ These writers are sometimes on the brink of it. Mr. Joyce is the only one who has taken the plunge.

We should like to imagine that the exasperation of the modern sensibility will be crystallised out into a new Aristophanism, a new Rabelaisianism, so that an explosive condition might find its proper satisfaction in an explosive art. It would help to

¹ Since this was written, M. Morand has published a remarkable book of stories, *Ouvert la Nuit*, in which the attempt at a comic synthesis is very evident.

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clear the ground for the necessary development of the calmer art of the novel, and to clear the minds of those who will have to address themselves to the problem of finding lucid symbols for the complexities they wish to convey. Undoubtedly there is a means of satisfying the new standards of fidelity to experience without recourse to obscurity and hieroglyphics. The road may not be easy to find, but it must be found. Otherwise the novel will reach a ridiculous position in which all that is interesting will be unintelligible, and all that is intelligible will be uninteresting. That moment, indeed, sometimes seems very near. But we believe the danger is not really serious. Art has a way of surviving the most inevitable disasters. The present unsettlement of the art of fiction is perhaps hardly more than a crisis of indigestion.

Prose fiction is the only vital and comprehensive literary form to-day. After a long period of constraint under the prestige of Flaubert, it has had suddenly to accommodate itself to the immense reality of the nineteenth century. For many years the novelist has believed that the nineteenth century was Flaubert and Turgenev; now it turns out to have been Stendhal, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Tchehov, and heaven knows what in science besides. We cannot wonder if modern fiction has bad dreams; only if it were not disturbed would there be cause for wonder, and alarm.

[March, 1922.]

*English Poetry in the
Eighteenth Century*

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In a famous passage, Matthew Arnold assured us that we should not improve on the classification of poetry which the Greeks adopted, and that their categories of epic, dramatic, lyric, and so forth, "had a natural propriety and should be adhered to."

It may (he admitted) sometimes seem doubtful to which of two categories a poem belongs; whether this or that poem is to be called, for instance, narrative or lyric, lyric or elegiac. But there is to be found in every good poem a strain, a predominant note, which determines the poem as belonging to one of these kinds rather than another; and here is the best proof of the value of the classification and of the advantage of adhering to it.

No doubt, we are inclined to reply, it is the best proof, if it is true. But are there in fact these strains, these predominant notes, which are so decisive? What, for instance, is the predominant and determining note in the *Divina Commedia*? Is not the truth rather that classification of the Greeks was really formal, but that with them a classification of poetry by form had some bearing upon content, because the forms for certain contents were fixed by convention? With us, on the other hand,

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a constant relation between poetical form and poetical content does not exist, and for this reason it may be not only burdensome, but even hazardous and uncritical, for us to preserve a classification based upon qualities that are no longer essential.

Certainly it is true that some of these traditional categories are used at the present time with an extreme ambiguity. We imagine we know a dramatic poem when we see one; it is a play in verse. But we have no hesitation in calling a narrative poem dramatic, if its quality seems to demand the epithet. *King Lear* is dramatic by virtue of its form; *Lamia* by virtue of its content. And Matthew Arnold himself, by urging us to look for "a strain, a predominant note"—that is, a quality not of the form, but of the content alone—destroyed the very basis of the classification he recommended. If we are to classify by content, we had better not use epithets of form: if we do use them—and the tradition is almost compulsory—we shall need to have our best wits about us if we are to avoid confusions.

¶ In spite of the strength of the tradition, it is, however, noticeable that the old classification has, in the actual practice of modern criticism, been largely discarded. It has fallen into abeyance, because it no longer gave any help in the work of distinction. A modern critic does not occupy himself with wondering whether a poem is dramatic, or epic, or narrative, or lyric; he is concerned only to discover whether it is poetry. *Hoc opus, hic labor est.* If, in his unguarded moments, he

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lets fall the phrase “lyrical quality,” the phrase itself is enough to show that he is describing an essence, not a form. And it is a thousand to one that the phrase, as he uses it, is simply synonymous with “poetical quality.” At all events, he is quite as ready to attribute “lyrical quality” to a dramatic or narrative poem as he is to deny it to a lyric.

The word “lyric,” indeed, as a description of the formal qualities of a poem, is no longer of any use to us. It no longer implies, as once it did, that the poem was written for music ; it means hardly more than that the poem is a short one, and that it is not a sonnet. But lyrical as an epithet of essential quality is much more alluring as an object of analysis. Moreover, it calls urgently for examination. For it is at once vague and significant. When we have said that a poem has “the true lyrical quality,” we feel that we have said something important about it. We have decided that it is a poem.

In our more ruthless moments we may go on to declare that a poem which lacks this quality is not a poem at all. It may be eloquent, brilliant, witty, musical; but it lacks the finest poetic vitality, and is therefore not a poem. The method, though attractive, is too arbitrary; for, even if we admit that “lyrical” is the commonest name for the highest and most essential quality of poetry, there is still no reason why a poem from which this is absent should not be a poem. The house of poetry contains many mansions. We must be content

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with saying that the truest and most indisputable poetry, the poetry which we could least afford to lose, the poetry which seems to illuminate our human universe with a gleam of a purer existence and a fuller knowledge than our own, is lyrical. Lyrical is simply the name by which we recognise its peculiar quality and power.

Can we go further than this? Or must we remain on the brink of knowledge with the dubious divining-rod of the *je ne sais quoi* in our hands?

The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of Wittgenstein, which I believe to be the profoundest philosophical work of our modern times, and in an important sense the only *modern* work of philosophy, contains a simple sentence which has much bearing on our question. Though its full implications can appear only when it is understood as a link in a delicate and subtle chain of analytical reasoning, it may yet be separated from it to our advantage. "Everything that can be thought," says the young Austrian philosopher, "can be thought clearly; everything that can be said, can be said clearly." And again, "What can be shown, cannot be said."

At first sight these are the sentences of a rationalist among the rationalists. But even without our knowledge that their author is a mystic, a little thought upon them reveals unexpected implications. Can what is thought in the highest poetry be thought clearly, or what is said by it be said clearly? It cannot be thought otherwise; it cannot be said otherwise: so much we know. The knowledge is, indeed, part of our recognition

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of its quality. But that it cannot be thought or said otherwise is far different from its being thought and said clearly. We know it is not; we know it cannot be. We know that what is clearly thought and said in the greatest poetry has so little to do with its own deepest import that it is negligible in comparison with it. We feel that this quintessential poetry could, indeed, be defined as the result of an effort to bring unthinkable thoughts and unsayable sayings within the range of human minds and ears.

And this mystical poetic truth is, in reality, by no means as recondite as it seems. All that is, even to the most rationalistic among us, of vital importance in our pedestrian little lives, is unthinkable by our thought, and unspeakable by our speech. What man has ever said to the woman of his choice, "I love you," without the instant knowledge that the words—his best, his truest, and his simplest words—were almost a vain and barren parody of what he intended and what he knew? Or what man, having convinced his intellect that he is what he is "by some mechanic laws," and that the constitution of the universe and not himself is responsible for his being and his acts, has freed himself thereby from the ineluctable sense of sin, a secret knowledge that he cannot think or utter? Or again, and as it were from the other side, what man can think or speak the meaning of the one word, "forgiveness." It is a mystery that he knows within himself fully or not at all. It may be revealed to him by the parable of the Lost Sheep

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or the Prodigal Son ; but it is not thought or spoken there. It *is* revealed. "What can be shown, cannot be said."

"Ethics," says Wittgenstein elsewhere, "is transcendental. Ethics and æsthetics are one." These familiar examples of the mysteries of life as it comes to each one of us, are in sober truth, also examples of the mystery of poetry. It lies in the very heart of the nature of all great poetry—of all great art whatsoever—that it should reveal to us directly a kind of existence of which our mundane minds and senses have no inkling. It is the secret kingdom out of which Anton Tchehov one day bore away a mysterious and authentic law ; it is the realm "where everything is forgiven, and it would be *strange* not to forgive." In that sentence, beyond a doubt, is a star dropped out from the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within us. And the direct intuition which tells us that that star fell from the same heaven as the lines of great poetry, the themes of great music, among which we store it, tells us also that art and morality are one.

But that profound truth, which perhaps ought not to be casually presented for fear of misunderstanding, is relevant now only in so far as it throws a light upon the nature of that poetry which, wherever we find it, we call lyrical. "It is the revelation of another kingdom." That another kingdom exists may be proved by any one who will look into the reality of his own being. That the kingdom he finds there is the same that the poets reveal to us—of that there may, indeed, be no proof, for no proof

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is needed. To argue with those who have not, because they do not choose to have, experience of them, is idle and sterile disputation.

It is in the nature of things that these revelations of another kingdom or another plane of being through poetry should be intermittent in the history of poetry. After all, poetry is but one of the arts of literature, and literature is but one of the arts, and the arts themselves are but one means of attaining this revelation. There may be periods when the human spirit seeks it by the way of religious devotion ; and certainly it would be generally true to say that the great efflorescence of the arts in the West which seems now to have reached its decline began to unfold itself as mediæval Christianity began to wither. There may also be periods when, for some profound cause, humanity cares for none of these things. The eighteenth century seems to have been such a period. During it the minds of men appear to have been occupied with the work of liberating the individual from what he felt to be the bondage of tradition. Now, across the distance of a separating century, we can see that the task of asserting the complete independence of man was necessary in order that he should learn by bitter experience that it is not possible for him to live in complete and conscious independence, and that, if he could not endure the restraint of a tradition which seemed to him lifeless and untrue, he must dig down into himself for a new one. That was Rousseau's great work. He discovered that the new tradition was not unlike the old. The

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reality in both was the same; but in the old it had been hidden, in the new it shone with all the golden light of personal discovery.

To treat of the history of lyrical poetry in such a period is therefore, in a sense, to treat of the thing which is not. So long as the human mind insists on a complete and conscious mastery of its own destiny, lyrical poetry (considered, as we have tried to consider it, as essence and not as form) can scarcely begin to be. It demands for its own birth an admission of that which is beyond reason; its very roots lie in the unthinkable and unspeakable. Of such an admission the eighteenth century was afraid; and rightly afraid, because the force and import of its ultimate admission was to depend upon its having been wrung from it. Pending its final enforced surrender, the duty of the century was to hold the fort of reason to the last, and to insist that literature should express itself in rational propositions. The unthinkable was madness; the unspeakable, inhuman. Only a later generation was to begin the gradual work of discovery that they are the sanest and most human of all.

In so far, then, as the latest historian of English poetry in the eighteenth century¹ is dealing with the realities and not the surface of his subject, his story should be of the suffering and discomfiture of those prematurely born souls who, living among the defenders of the fortress of reason and self-sufficiency, were at heart disloyal because of their

¹ *English Lyrical Poetry in the Eighteenth Century.* By Oswald Doughty. (O'Connor).

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premonition that the defence was vain. They had come to learn that man cannot live by bread alone ; they were torn by unthinkable thoughts, unspeakable words groped for utterance within them. It is the great merit of Mr. Doughty's narrative that amid the waste of poetic futility which he is compelled to include, out of reverence for the formal meaning of the word "lyrical," he does make a serious and on the whole a successful attempt to follow the shining thread of this poignant and living story. Collins, Smart, Chatterton, Cowper, Gray—of these five, in whose poetry there is something more than a fleeting glimpse of a reality beyond the actual, one killed himself, and three died melancholy-mad. Only Gray managed to maintain himself against what Dr. Johnson called "that hunger of the imagination which preys upon life." Thomson, also, who was to some degree the father of them all, preserved himself ; but in him the quality we seek is vague and diffused. We are more at ease in denying its absence than in asserting its presence in his poetry.

But the human tragedy of the story, grievous though it is, can be regarded only as a sign, which he who runs may read, of the struggle which vexed the soul of the age of Reason. We do not know enough of the victims to follow their vicissitudes. What do we know of Collins, of Smart, of Chatterton ? Even their names seem to have survived only by accident. It is as though the age itself, resolute to preserve its appearance of rational calm,

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had swept away all trace of its poets, as a man puts away an importunate thought. And they themselves become almost wholly the creatures of our theories and imaginations. We imagine them as men compelled by circumstance to mistrust the gleam they saw, and, mistrusting, to have been denied a fuller vision. It takes a superhuman bravery to believe a faith discovered in utter isolation. Wordsworth had Coleridge; they both had Southey; and all had Rousseau before them. Rousseau had no one, but in a measure he had Europe. But Collins and Smart and Chatterton were truly alone. We cannot wonder that they dared no more ; the wonder is rather that they should have dared so much, in the face of universal ridicule or universal neglect.

If we regard, as we must, Collins and Gray as the most intellectually conscious of those eighteenth-century poets who were troubled by a glimpse of the brave, translunary things, we may look in them for some indication of the poet's own feeling towards his own discomfiture. It was, in both these men, as we might expect, a sense of lack rather than a sense of gift by which they knew themselves poets. Collins, as he timidly reveals himself in his work, was one who knew what true poetry was, but knew not how to attain it. He invokes the Passions to his aid, he implores the help of Simplicity :

Faints the cold work till thou inspire the
whole—

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but he implores her in vain. We know that it was not wholly in vain ; but to Collins himself it must have seemed that the gods had denied him their most precious gift. And Gray, who lived longer, only lived to feel the same lack more keenly. Writing to Mason in 1756 at the age of forty, he had said :

The true lyric style, with all its flights of fancy, ornaments, heightening of expression and harmony of sound, is in its nature superior to every other style.

Though we must not bear too hardly upon the diction of a past age, we cannot help remarking the externality of the approach. Lyric is for Gray in this letter a manner rather than a quality. It is a manner which, being the most superior manner, Gray intends to adopt, to "go in for," with no apparent sense of misgiving. Eleven years later (in 1767), as he had come sensibly nearer to a true knowledge of his subject, he had reached a consciousness of his own failure to achieve it :

Extreme conciseness of expression, yet pure, perspicuous, and musical, is one of the grand beauties of lyric poetry ; this I have always aimed at and never could attain.

He, also, did for a moment attain it, though not so unequivocally as Collins ; and he attained it most memorably in his lament for the decay of poetry.

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Woods that wave o'er Delphi's steep,
Isles that crown the Ægean deep,
Fields that cool Ilissus laves,
Or where Mæander's amber waves
In lingering labyrinths creep;
How do your tuneful voices languish
Mute, but to the voice of anguish ?

In those beautiful lines are revealed the two sources from which Collins and Gray sought the quality they were so conscious of lacking. They turned to Greek, and they turned to Milton, as the chief inheritor of the classical tradition in England. Gray's second description of lyrical poetry fits no English poet so well as him who—

Rode sublime
Upon the seraph wings of Ecstasy
The secrets of the abyss to spy;

and the intimate connection between Collins's regretful odes to Simplicity and the Passions, and the famous Miltonic definition of poetry as "simple, sensuous, and passionate" leaps to the eye.

Impassioned simplicity, then, was what they lacked and sought. And perhaps no single descriptive phrase suggests the quality of true lyric better than this one, which we may call, by adoption, theirs. But whence was impassioned simplicity to come? Submission to influences, even the finest, or the gradual discipline of taste are powerless to achieve this end. There is far more

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" impassioned simplicity " in the " barbaric " Whitman than in all the English poetry of the eighteenth century before Blake. For the end they sought a faith is necessary, an assurance of the existence of a world beyond the rational reality. In an age of Reason, when the approach to ancient faiths is barred by an accumulation of dogma which the free mind cannot accept, the only way to a faith is the way of self-exploration, the way so majestically described by the modern French poet:

J'ai fui partout : partout j'ai retrouvé la Loi
Quelque chose en moi qui soit plus Moi-même
que moi.

And the road to this discovery is the discrimination between the true emotion and the false, between the permanent and the ephemeral reaction. Just in so far as the eighteenth-century poets strove for an emotional sincerity—the truest of them before Blake got no farther on the road than this—they have endured. It is this, and this alone, which keeps untarnished the faint radiance of scattered lines of Parnell and Shenstone, and even of Akenside.

Parnell's

'Twas thus, as under shade I stood
I sang my wishes to the wood,
And lost in thought no more perceived
The branches whisper as they waved :
It seemed as all the quiet place
Confessed the presence of the grace :

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Shenstone's

But sure, to soothe our youthful dreams
Those banks and streams appeared more bright
Than other banks, than other streams;

and perhaps the two last lines of the dour Aken-side's poem to his Amoret : .

This, sure, is Beauty's happiest part:
This gives the most unbounded sway:
This shall enchant the subject heart
When rose and lily fade away
And she be still, in spite of time,
Sweet Amoret in all her prime;

—each seems to be kept alive by the faint breath of a true emotion.

True emotion, of the same kind as this, is what lifts much of Cowper's poetry above the ravages of time. The perfectly simple human feeling of his poem to his lifelong companion, Mrs. Unwin:

The twentieth year is wellnigh past
Since first our sky was overcast;
Ah, would that this might be the last !
 My Mary !

or the more tragic confession of

To me the waves that ceaseless broke
Upon the dangerous coast
Hoarsely and ominously spoke
Of all my treasure lost.

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Your sea of troubles you have past
And found the peaceful shore;
I, tempest-tossed, and wrecked at last,
Come home to port no more—

have made them durable. But the finest quintessence of poetry is not in them. The separation between the dark ecstasies of Cowper's acquired Calvinism and the nature of the man himself was too great. His religion could not nourish his poetry: it merely broke the man.

And, however difficult it may be to analyse exactly, this sense of separation between the sources of poetry and the mind of the poet is what chiefly haunts us as we read Mr. Doughty's narrative. If the poet was for a moment uplifted on "the seraph wings of Fantasy" it was only that the catastrophe should be the more disastrous. Christopher Smart had the vision of his *Song to David* only in order to qualify for the mad-house: Collins achieved his *Ode to Evening* only to succumb to melancholia; and the transports of Cowper's sombre religion could never enter his poetry at all. Like men who are fed after starvation, their comfort was only an increase of their pain. If they saw, then what they saw was something irreconcilable with the life in which they were involved, and the vision merely intensified their despair; if they attained a momentary faith, they could not hold it long enough to make an assertion of it, they could not slowly master it and make it

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their own until it became a thing by which they could work and live, as Keats and Shelley and Wordsworth and Blake were to do. They could not trust themselves.

We can conceive no more terrible fate for the man of vision than a real isolation, without friends or disciples to confirm his faith in his own insight. To triumph over such conditions his strength would need to be superhuman. That the poets of our eighteenth century did not triumph appears just an inevitable necessity when we contrast the solid phalanx which the poets of the romantic revival presented to the world with the solitude in which their predecessors worked and died. What, we cannot help wondering, would Kit Smart have been had he known of Blake? As it was, the proof of his lunacy was his power to write such verses as these:

For Adoration, in the dome
Of Christ the sparrows find a home,
 And on His olives perch;
The swallow also dwells with thee,
O man of God's humility,
 Within his Saviour's church . . .

Strong is the lion—like a coal
His eyeball,—like a bastion's mole
 His chest against the foes ;
Strong the gier-eagle on his sail,
Strong against tide the enormous whale
 Emerges as he goes.

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But stronger still, in earth and air,
And in the sea, the man of prayer,
 And far beneath the tide;
And in the seat to faith assigned,
Where ask is have and seek is find,
 Where knock is open wide.

And what might not Chatterton have done, could he have known the great poet who turned to him from Milton and "watered his name with tears"? Even more than of Smart in Blake, we catch the deliberate echo in Keats of such lines of Chatterton as these :

When Autumn blake and sun-burned both
 appear
With his gold hand gilding the fallen leaf
Bringing up Winter to fulfil the year,
Bearing upon his back the ripèd sheaf;
When all the hills with woody seed are white;
When levin-fires and lanes do meet from far the
 sight;
When the fair apple, ruddy as even-sky,
Do bend the tree unto the fructile ground:
When juicy pears and berries of black dye
Do dance in air, and call the eyne around;
Then, be the even foul, or even fair,
Methinks my heartes joy is steynced with some
 care.

Such conjectures are, no doubt, as idle as any "might have beens." Yet the confrontation of

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such related poets as Smart and Blake, or Chatterton and Keats, the comparison between the fair flowers "no sooner blown but blasted," and the full unfolding that was to come, once more suggests the question : Why was it so ?

We have said they were isolated; but the further question, What was the cause of their isolation ? is insistent. It is hardly enough to repeat that it was, after all, the Age of Reason ; that men's minds were deliberately turned towards a goal that is alien to poetry; or that they thought it a derogation of their humanity to accept satisfactions of which their intellects had not complete control. That is a logical and coherent statement of the facts, yet it is hardly sufficient. The desires of the soul cannot easily be eradicated ; they are perennial. When we look back on the eighteenth century, it seems that these desires were satisfied neither by poetry nor religion nor works. But this calm Palladian front of impassivity and decorum was not to be had for nothing ; it must, we feel, have been bought at a price. And we find ourselves returning for some knowledge of the inward struggle to the familiar figure of Dr. Johnson. Only in the living pages of Boswell can his effort after complete rationality be squared with his childish prayers and dogmatic faith. But within the soul of the old hero was perpetual war, showing itself to the world as profound melancholy. It was not so much that he was blind to the vision or insensible to the appeals of another kingdom, as that he was afraid of them. The man who put

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down the phrase : “ the hunger of the imagination which preys upon life ” was not writing in ignorance. He had surely felt it himself. But it seemed to him, as it has seemed to many a rationalist since, that the hunger was ravenous, insatiable, and disastrous. It was an appetite which had best be strangled at birth, for who could tell into what strange deserts it might lead ? Were he once to let go his hold on the rock of reason, he would be drowned in the flood.

Johnson was at war with himself. The more he thundered against the deserters of common sense in life and literature, the closer he clung to his own naïve religious faith. As he was extreme in the one, he was extreme in the other also; he was like a man dragged asunder by the wild horses of opposed desires. Had he known that there was no cause for fear, had his great honesty had the power to go deeper, to attempt to reconcile his religious creed with his literary faith and take the consequences of the necessary exploration, then perhaps some chapters in the history of poetry in his time might have been less desolating than they are. As it was, he paid the penalty of his contradictions and his fears ; he refused to let the hunger of the imagination prey upon life, and he suffered the same torments as the half-hearted rebels against reason who could not refuse. Like Collins and Gray and Cowper, he endured agonies of melancholy, for no less than they he suffered from the divided soul.

But there was, indeed, no cause for fear ; the

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hunger of the imagination is insatiable only so long as it is denied satisfaction. The other kingdom is terrifying only to those who, having been vouchsafed a Pisgah-sight of it, refuse or are afraid to advance and make it their own. The next generation of English poets was to have the courage of its own necessities, and though its destinies were tragic also, the tragedy was temporal and not spiritual ; they have left behind them an abiding sense of fulfilment. Of the four great romantic poets of the early nineteenth century there was not one who hesitated to proclaim his faith in a reality beyond the visible, or who by drawing back from unthinkable thoughts or unsayable sayings betrayed his own assurance of certainty. What could not be said, could be shown. And those who stumble over their statements receive the truth from their parables. They may recognise it no further than to say that Keats and Shelley and Wordsworth and Blake were great poets, because they wrote great poetry. But it is a kind of cowardice to leave the matter there. If great poetry is important to a man, it behoves him to inquire in what its greatness consists.

The four great poets who came to satisfy the pent-up longings of a century were, above all, seekers after the truth. What truth they found they tried to utter, and they did utter. But the utterance of poetry is not the utterance of logic. Neither is the philosophy of poetry the philosophy of the schools. Remembering this, we may claim for them precisely and in terms the vindication of

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the sentence of Sir Joshua Reynolds, which Mr. Doughty quotes as evidence of the unacceptable demands made by the age of Reason upon poetry:

Well-turned periods in eloquence, or harmony of numbers in poetry, however highly we may esteem them, can never be considered as of equal importance with the art of unfolding truths that are of importance to mankind, and which make men better and wiser.

What perhaps Sir Joshua did not know was that the truths which are of importance to mankind and which make men better and wiser, are truths of such a kind that they cannot be expounded in maxims or formulated articles. The rational mind cannot apprehend them ; and in respect to them, its essential function is to learn and to acknowledge its own insufficiency. The pinnacle of a pure rationality is a convinced and willing self-abnegation.

If we are to indict the age of Reason—but it is still harder to indict an age than a nation—if we are to indicate wherein the age of Reason failed, we must say that it did not fulfil its own professions. It was not rational enough, just as Dr. Johnson himself was not rational enough. And when the moment came, and the soul of man revolted against the bitter bread of reason, and ate greedily of what the poets offered them, not even then was rationality convinced of its own final impotence. Not until our own age have the acknowledged masters of

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the intellect made a convinced and willing surrender. The concluding sentences of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* are the philosophical echo of Einstein's physical revelations ; the subtle rationalist is at one with the genius of scientific thought.

We feel (says Wittgenstein) that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.

The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.

(Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted ?)

The sense of life was clear, or partly clear, to the poets of the "romantic revival." They, no more than the greatest poets before them, could *say* wherein this sense consisted; but precisely because they could not *say* it, they could *show* it. Perhaps Sir Joshua would have been surprised at the manner in which they obeyed his behest to "unfold truths of importance to mankind" ; but, when his surprise was over, and—acute critic as he was—he had examined the manifest difference between compulsion of the being and conviction of the intellect, he could then have added the necessary corollary to his sentence ; namely, that only when poets

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are occupied with the act of unfolding truths of importance to mankind can they achieve the most splendid periods in eloquence or the finest harmony in numbers. A poet can become a great poet only if his message is urgent. The poets of the eighteenth century languished chiefly because of their knowledge that their messages were not urgent.

[December, 1922.]

*A Note on the Madness of
Christopher Smart*

A Note on the Madness of Christopher Smart

MR. EDMUND BLUNDEN, who is a poet of real gifts, and therefore not afraid to sink his individuality in the laborious work of rescuing his predecessors from oblivion, has followed up his edition of the poetry of John Clare with a new edition of Christopher Smart's *Song to David*.¹ Not that Kit Smart is quite so forgotten as Clare was : he is one of the little flies immortalised in the pellucid and enduring amber of Boswell's *Johnson*.

BURNEY : How does poor Smart do, Sir ; is he likely to recover ?

JOHNSON : It seems as if his mind had ceased to struggle with the disease ; for he grows fat upon it.

BURNEY : Perhaps, Sir, that may be from want of exercise.

JOHNSON : No, Sir ; he has partly as much exercise as he used to have, for he digs in the garden. Indeed, before his confinement, he used for exercise to walk to the ale house ; but he was *carried* back again. I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people

¹ *A Song to David, with other Poems.* By Christopher Smart. Chosen, with biographical and critical preface, by Edmund Blunden. (R. Cobden Sanderson.)

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praying with him ; and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as any one else. Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen ; and I have no passion for it.

While he was shut up in the asylum, Kit Smart wrote the *Song to David* and the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. No doubt in the 1760's, in the full prime of the Age of Reason, those poems were an additional and conclusive evidence of Smart's insanity. The same rationality which clapped Smart in the mad-house imposed the Stamp Act on the American Colonies. Nowadays, pretending to a wisdom after the event, we should call this reason a want of imagination. But whether we English have any more imagination now is a question to which an honest answer is disturbing.

From this angle the history of English poetry in the eighteenth century is a singularly depressing story. The real poets were all "mad." Chatterton, Savage, Collins, Smart, Cowper, were suicides or lunatics, or both. Even the equable Gray was on the verge of melancholia. At the end of the sombre procession comes John Clare, "the asylum poet," whom the doctor certified for the mad-house because he showed an unconquerable inclination to write verses. And at the end of the period, when a few holes in the leaden pall of "rationality" had been made by the lightnings of the French Revolution, some of the great ones had narrow escapes. Coleridge was safely lodged in Gilman's house ; and what would have happened to Keats and Shelley,

On the Madness of Christopher Smart

had they not died before society had begun to take serious notice of them, who can say? Wordsworth opted for sanity, and his poetry fled.

It is not a comfortable retrospect. In the old, old days before modern "civilisation" had begun its levelling, there was more room for the poets. They were mad, but their madness was "divine." The gods, nay, the very principle of the divine, visited them. But in the Age of Reason, they were simply mad. No more divinity about their delusions: no more reverence for the great unspeakable power which manifested through them. Our modern civilisation is wonderful, tremendous, terrifying; but it has no room for these things. It does not want, and it will not have, the prophet and the seer. The poet, the authentic poet, is no less: he is the *vates sacer* now, as ever, for the truth he knows is eternal. But there is no room for it in the philosophy of modern civilisation, and modern civilisation will one day pay the penalty for trying to shut out what is older and more enduring than itself.

Such are the thoughts one has in reading Christopher Smart again. Most people who know anything about poetry know the *Song to David*: there is a good, solid chunk of it in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*; but a whole is better than a part, and the most astonishing thing about the *Song to David* is that it is a whole. For its uniqueness—and there is *nothing* like it in the great range of English poetry—chiefly consists in the unexpected combination of unity, of swift and firm design, of

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vivid *ordonnance* (to use Coleridge's word) with an impassioned and ecstatic sublimity which one would have thought rebellious by nature to such discipline. Not to know the *Song to David* as a whole is in a very real sense not to know it at all.

But the *Song to David* is not new: what will be new to most people is the strange quality of Smart's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, some of which Mr. Blunden has rescued, together with a good deal of merely trivial verse. These *Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Fasts and Festivals of the Church of England* were printed together with his versions of the Psalms and the second edition of the *Song to David* in 1765. I imagine from the internal evidence that Smart wrote the versions of the Psalms first, then being uplifted by the splendour of the Psalmist's imagination and controlled by his knowledge of the Psalmist's art, uttered the *Song to David*, and finally, relaxed into a mood of calm and simple serenity, composed the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*.

However this may be, there are marvellous things in them, and these things are marvellous in a way quite different from that of the *Song to David*. Consider, for example, the last two verses of *The Nativity*.

Spinks and ouzels sing sublimely,
 “ We too have a Saviour born ” ;
Whiter blossoms burst untimely
 On the blest Mosaic Thorn.

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God all bounteous, all-creative,
Whom no ills from good dissuade,
Is incarnate, *and a native*
Of the very world he made.

There is a simple miracle in that last line and a half: and one need not be a professing Christian to feel that it is the miracle of the Nativity itself. Or take lines from *St. Philip and St. James*.

And the lily smiles supremely
Mentioned by the Lord on earth. . . .

This is the true, the strange Christian naïveté: the sense or the knowledge that all living creatures are brothers of men, children of God, and can only be understood in virtue of the one love which unites them all. By this spirit the primeval innocence of Eden (of which Rubens had a Pisgah-sight in his great picture) is restored, and for the moment that we share it we are no longer fallen away from our first perfection. It is the great Christian naïveté of St. Francis. It was to be manifested again, half a century later, in the poetry of John Clare, for the fitful yet unmistakable gleam plays over all Clare's work.

The very darkness smiles to wear
The stars that show us God is there.

It is a perception, a knowledge, a mode of understanding, which Christ Himself brought into the

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world. “ Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” “ Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing ? ” Before Christ, no one of whom memory remains to us had spoken words like these: before Him, this sense of communion in life between all living creatures did not exist. There is no record of it in the words of the wise before Him : the beautiful descriptions of nature in the ancient poets—and in spite of the common report, there *are* beautiful descriptions of nature in the ancient poets—are of another kind. They have not this immediacy of contact : the blood bond of brothers is not there. And, to speak truth, it is not in many poets of the Christian era: it is not, I believe, in Shakespeare, or in Dante, or in Milton, or even in Wordsworth. Wordsworth is too deliberate ; there is a grave and deep philosophy in his attitude. But this *naïveté* is spontaneous, like the kiss one may sometimes surprise between two little children who believe themselves unwatched. I have seen such a kiss between two tiny staggerers in the Luxembourg Gardens. It is innocent, it is rapturous, and it is wise.

I find the gleam of it everywhere in Smart’s *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, as I find it everywhere in Clare. I can describe it only as a glimpse of simple and incredible purity. No one can hold a mystery all the time; perhaps few can perceive it when it is pointed out to them: the pointing-out stands in the way. But it seems not only to hover, but to rest in the last three verses of *St. Philip and St. James*.

On the Madness of Christopher Smart

Hark! aloud the blackbird whistles,
With surrounding fragrance blest,
And the goldfinch in the thistles
Makes provision for her nest.

Even the hornet hives for honey,
Bluecap builds his stately dome,
And the rocks supply the coney
With a fortress and a home.

But the servants of the Saviour,
Which with gospel-peace are shod,
Have no bed but what the paviour
Makes them in the porch of God.

That, to me, is Franciscan poetry *in excelsis*.

And suddenly, when I think that Christopher Smart and John Clare, who had perhaps more of this strange and peculiar gift of naiveté than any other of our poets, were both shut up in asylums, I wonder whether St. Francis, yes, and Christ himself, would not be safeguarded in the same way ; and I turn out of my pocket-book a cutting of *The Times* report of the Harnett lunacy case, which has lately shocked English public opinion. “All that Mr. Harnett had”—of the evidence on which he was certified as a lunatic—“was the statement of Dr. Gray (the assistant medical-officer at the asylum) that ‘You have too much Jesus about you.’” It is a dangerous thing to have.

We take our Dr. Johnson too much from Boswell. We cannot help it. If we are to see the

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great man at all, we must see him through Boswell's eyes. But we should be on our guard against feeling him through Boswell's mind. We need not echo the thundering paradox of Macaulay, in order to agree with him that Boswell was too small to *understand* his hero. Boswell was smug and satisfied in the Age of Reason : Johnson had had terrifying glimpses of what lay beyond. If Johnson had written only the single phrase, "the hunger of the imagination which preys upon life," we should know that he knew there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in Boswell's philosophy. We must never forget that Johnson was religious in an age of irreligion; and the knowledge which he compressed by force of will within the rigid framework of his rationality shows nowhere more clearly than in the implications of his later remark on Kit Smart:

Madness frequently discovers itself by unnecessary deviation from the usual modes of the world. My poor friend Smart showed the disturbance of his mind by falling upon his knees, and saying his prayers in the street, or in any other unusual place. Now, although, rationally speaking, it is greater madness not to pray at all, than to pray as Smart did, I am afraid there are so many who do not pray, that their understanding is not called in question.

[April, 1924.]

Poe's Poetry

Poe's Poetry

It has long since been admitted that the two greatest poets of America are Poe and Whitman. The poetry of both belongs to the literature of the world. But there is an essential difference between their positions. Whitman is almost "a hundred per cent. American"; Poe is not. Whitman is clean outside the English tradition; Poe belongs to it. As a poet he is the successor of the English romantics; he learned from Byron and Shelley and Keats, and he taught Swinburne: as a prose writer, he alone gave to the great romantic movement in fiction which swept over England early in the nineteenth century the immortality of high and serious art. Were it not for the consummation of Poe's tales, the mysteries of Monk Lewis and Mrs. Radcliffe would have been only a *cul-de-sac*. No other American writer has so clearly marked a place in the English tradition as Poe; he is a necessary link in the chain. To compensate, no great American writer is less distinctively American than he. This is not to diminish America's claim to Poe, or to suggest that his life would have been of another kind had he worked in England. The *âmes damnées* of romanticism would no doubt have been unfortunate in any country. But Poe would at least have found congenial companions in London and in Paris; he would have tasted some of the sweets of an immense *succès d'estime*; and perhaps

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he would have been able to earn more money. It is no good repining over Poe's miserable life now. But more truly than Baudelaire himself he was the albatross of the famous sonnet ; in America he was exiled from his element, and he died in consequence.

Speculation upon what might have been but was not is generally dismissed as idle day-dreaming. But it has a function, and a valuable function, in criticism. It is a method of exercising the logic of the imagination. A great writer is something more than a man who lived his circumscribed physical existence at a given point of time; he is an incarnate potentiality of the human soul, concerning which it is legitimate to inquire whether the conditions attending its embodiment were good or bad. Relatively good, of course, is the best we can hope for genius in this rough world of compromise; the artist has no right to complain if he is misunderstood by the large mass of his contemporaries. But he has the right to expect to be comprehended by a few of his peers. The artist to whom this is denied may arraign the injustice of Heaven. Poe's isolation in America was of this unhappy and stultifying kind, and its effects upon his poetry are plain. For the most remarkable thing about him as a poet is the contrast between his scanty production—even with a long introduction and twenty new fragments, Mr. Whitty's edition makes a very small book—and the natural facility, the unmistakable fecundity, of his poetic genius. Poe was, by endowment, a prolific poet ; as prolific as the men between whom he

ideally takes his place, as Keats and Shelley, or as Swinburne and Tennyson. He was not by temper a meticulous artist. He theorised about poetry, it is true ; but that was rather a manifestation of his general intellectual alertness (and, to some extent, a gesture of defiance) than a sign of unusual poetic self-consciousness. There is an almost Byronic freedom and flow in his verses ; but he had a finer and more delicate mind than Byron's, and some of his poems are on an altogether higher poetic level, while in most of them can be found a few lines of a kind that Byron could never have written.

Moreover, the poems of Poe's boyhood, *Tamerlane*, published when he was eighteen, and *Al Aaraaf*, published when he was twenty, though they have their immaturities, are astonishing productions. They are, indubitably, poems, and they contain passages of imaginative beauty and splendid phrasing. To a modern reader, *Al Aaraaf*, which might justly be called Poe's *Endymion*, holds suggestions both of Keats and of Shelley:

Now happiest, loveliest in yon lovely earth
Whence sprang the Idea of Beauty into birth,
(Falling in wreaths thro' many a startled star
Like woman's hair 'mid pearls, until, afar,
It lit on hills Achaian, and there dwelt)
She looked into Infinity—and knelt.

Surely, one says, that is the work of a young man who not only has “the vision and the faculty divine,” but has also read Keats and Shelley. Yet

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it must be very doubtful whether Poe had read them when he wrote *Al Aaraaf*. It was written at some time between 1827 and 1829—that is, before the Galignani edition of the two English poets, and at a time when the total number of copies of books by both of them not gathering dust upon the publishers' shelves, probably did not exceed a thousand. It is hardly likely that a dozen had crossed the Atlantic, and less likely still that two of them fell into the hands of an impecunious soldier in a Virginian garrison.

The point is interesting. Even if *Al Aaraaf* owed something to Keats and Shelley, it is still a remarkable achievement. But if it owed them nothing it is altogether astonishing. Its richness, its movement, its lucidity, its evident creation out of overflow, make it one of those rare *juvenilia* from which can surely be predicted poetical eminence to come. This eminence Poe never completely attained, simply because the body of his finest work is not massive enough ; he has the quality but not the quantity of a great poet. And this imperfect realisation of his poetic powers was due, as the internal evidence alone makes clear, not to any deficiency in himself, but to the hostile conditions in which he was compelled to work.

Events not to be controlled [he wrote in the preface to the 1845 edition of his *Poems*] have prevented me from making, at any time, any serious effort in what, under happier circumstances would have been the field of my choice.

Poe's Poetry

With me poetry has been not a purpose, but a passion ; and the passions should be held in reverence ; they must not—they cannot at will be excited, with an eye to the paltry compensations, or the more paltry commendations, of mankind.

Our impulse is to suspect such a declaration. In Poe's case it was the simple truth.

After the first striking contrast between his obvious fecundity and the smallness of his production, another no less striking appears, between the comparative crudity of some of his poems and the delicate austerity of others. The crudity of *The Raven* and *Lenore* is, of course, only relative. These popular poems do produce their effect ; and still more certainly *The Bells* is successful. But when we compare them with *Ulalume* and *Annabel Lee* we feel that the creative impulse has been coarsened. The technical power is constant, but the degree to which Poe's poetic individuality is realised is much less in the one case than the other. It is the difference between the romance which the early nineteenth-century public adored and the romance which haunted Poe's mind—the heightened awareness of spiritual mystery which he so beautifully expressed in the little poem *Romance* :

Of late, eternal Condor years
So shake the very Heaven on high
With tumult as they thunder by,
I have no time for idle cares

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Through gazing on the unquiet sky.
And when an hour with calmer wings
Its down upon my spirit flings—
That little time with lyre and rhyme
To while away—forbidden things!
My heart would feel to be a crime
Unless it trembled with the strings.

In Poe's most popular poems his heart does not "tremble with the strings." We know, because there are many of his poems in which it does, where the poem is the expression of an intimate romantic emotion which has hardly more than the name in common with the crude supernatural thrills in which his contemporaries delighted.

The essence of Poe's romance is the eternal perplexity of the soul that turns aside from the harsh reality to the imagined perfection of a dream; it is a spirit akin to that which finds utterance in Mr. De la Mare's poetry to-day. And in Mr. De la Mare's poetry we find the distinctest echoes of Poe's subtler music. Compare the modern poet's *Thule*—itself a familiar country of Poe's—with :

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

That note as surely sounds on in Mr. De la Mare's work as Swinburne prolonged the robuster reverberations of *Ulalume*:

Astarte's bediamonded crescent
Distinct with its duplicate horn.

But, though Poe had many manners, he had but a single matter; and the manner which best suited it is not the manner by which he is best known. His finest poems (such as the lines *To Helen* or *The Sleeper*) are far quieter than those for which he is most famous, for his matter is secret and subtle and shy. The raven perched on the bust of Pallas is but a poor symbol for the intimate mystery. *Eldorado* touches it much more nearly and is, in consequence, a simple and perfect poem. It is Poe's equivalent of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, as *Al Aaraaf* is his *Endymion*. And this curious parallelism with Keats appears again in the low-toned and beautiful poems in blank verse addressed to various women. Poe seems to have shared Keats's determination to escape if he could from the dramatic artificiality of blank verse, and to make it responsive to more personal emotions. Like Keats himself, he was not wholly successful ; but we are struck by the curious resemblance in tone between the rewritten Induction to *Hyperion* and such an opening of Poe's as this :

Not long ago, the writer of these lines,
In the mad pride of intellectuality,
Maintained the power of word, denied that
ever
A thought arose within the human brain
Beyond the utterance of the human tongue.

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Compare with this the lines from the opening of the new *Hyperion* :

Who alive can say,
“Thou art no poet—mayst not tell thy dreams ?”
Since every man whose soul is not a clod
Hath visions and would speak if he had loved,
And been well nurtured in his mother-tongue.
Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse
Be poet’s or fanatic’s will be known
When this warm scribe, my hand, is in the grave.

There is a curious tonelessness (which some might call mere flatness) common to the blank verse of these two poets towards the end of their lives. Both alike give the impression that they have touched the fringe of a truth more sacred to them than Art itself.

Poe’s tragedy as a poet is that he was compelled to a compromise : he was forced by the necessities of living to use his great rhythmical gift in writing poems that might pass with an American editor of the Martin Chuzzlewit period. It is not surprising that he gave up the struggle, and devoted himself to prose of a kind that permitted him to make a little money without losing his own self-respect. Keats without his £2000, Shelley without his private income—would they, we wonder, have written more, or more finely, than Poe ? But they would at least have been sustained by a handful of understanding friends. It does not appear that Poe had one.

The twenty new poems that have been unearthed
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Poe's Poetry

by Mr. Whitty for this edition¹ are without importance, with the exception of one, a love-poem beginning :

Sleep on, sleep on, another hour—
I would not break so calm a sleep,
To wake to sunshine and to shower,
To smile and weep.

It has not the perfectly individual sentiment of Poe's best poems, but it is limpid and beautiful, and it is a valuable addition to his work. Most of the other pieces are scraps and album rhymes. One of them is worth remembering as a sample of the sentimental punning which poets of Poe's day permitted themselves. It is indited to a lady called Kate Carol.

When from your gems of thought I turn
To those pure orbs your heart to learn,
I scarce know which to prize more high—
The bright *i-dea*, or bright *dear-eye*.

Keats and Lamb both did that kind of thing occasionally; but even they never did anything worse. Young ladies and albums have a great deal to answer for; yet, to be honest, Poe seems to have owed to them some of the happiest moments of his distracted life.

[March, 1922.]

¹ *The Complete Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. Edited by T. R. Whitty. Constable.

Matthew Arnold the Poet

Matthew Arnold the Poet

IN Matthew Arnold the poet were two men, who struggled with one another until they were both exhausted, and the poet was dead.

We may call one of these Romantic, and the other Classical; or we might say that one was the heart and the other the head. It is better, however, not to be too quick with our labels, but rather try to see what was the particular nature of the deep division in his soul. For this division made him the individual poet that he was, and prevented him from becoming the greater poet that he might have been.

Matthew Arnold was a profoundly troubled man. He had no belief ; he was honest enough not to disguise from himself that he had none ; and he was serious enough to know by bitter experience that it is hard indeed to live without a belief. His loyalty to his own dignity as a human being kept him from seeking self-oblivion by a mere excess of blind activity in a society whose spirit seemed to him dead and its motives sordid. Yet, though he tried, he could not find in himself that inward confidence of soul which alone, as he well knew, would enable him to stand firm in isolation. A deep disbelief in the world calls for a correspondingly deep belief in oneself. This Matthew Arnold could not achieve. His was always

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the old unquiet heart
That neither deadens into rest
Nor ever feels the fiery glow
That whirls the spirit from itself away,
But fluctuates to and fro,
Never by passion quite possessed
And never quite benumbed by the world's sway.

It seemed to him that he could never possess his soul. Somewhere in the depths of himself, he believed, was concealed the truth of his own being, a life and a law of life indefeasibly his; but he could not make contact with them, save in fitful moments of which neither the influence nor even the memory endured. And he felt that he was like a ship whose compass had been demagnetised before the voyage of life began. The needle did not point steadily to the north; and the courses steered were erratic and contradictory.

And we have been on many thousand lines,
And we have shown on each talent and power,
But hardly have we for one little hour
Been in our own line, have we been ourselves.

To be oneself, to possess one's own soul,—this, Arnold knew, was the necessity; if this could be achieved, belief was achieved and an end of perturbation.

Resolve to be thyself : and know that he
Who finds himself loses his misery.

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But, through some hidden weakness, the way could not be found, the discovery could not be made. The water would not flow from the living rock at the bidding of his resolve. And slowly and steadily his creative impulse withered, because he could not strike the source of life within himself. He was a man of far too fine a nature to pretend to what he did not possess, or claim the discovery of that which he had not found. From the beginning he possessed "a sad lucidity of soul," in virtue of which he knew what he was, what he needed, and wherein he failed. The poems of his later years are few and far between ; they are cold and incredibly sad. The man who, growing old, could write of that condition, that

It is to spend long days
And not once feel that we were ever young

must have remembered that he had a soul chiefly by the pain of the iron that had entered into it.

To what could such a man hold fast ? Where could he look for balsam for what he called "the strange disease of modern life ?" From whom could he summon aid against "the something that infects the world ?" Being a poet, he turned to the poets. Of the poets who belonged to his own spiritual epoch, he regarded only two as having reached some kind of inward security. They were Goethe and Wordsworth. Yet Goethe seemed to him too remote and Olympian, and

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Wordsworth to have achieved his serenity by turning his face away from half the things that are. Perhaps, if he had wrestled with Shakespeare more, and compelled him to stand and abide his question, he would have found a deeper consolation than any which Wordsworth or Goethe could offer. Instead he tried to turn away to the serenity of Greece: the attempt was self-deception.

In a sense, Arnold's classicism was merely the culmination of his romanticism, just as Flaubert's impassivity was an extreme manifestation of his uncontrollable sensibility. These contemporaries were cast in the same mould : they were both by nature romantic individualists, they were both afraid of themselves, each sought safety as an artist in a principle outside himself, and alien to his own nature. Flaubert, the realist, and Matthew Arnold, the classicist, are kindred phenomena ; and their works reveal the same radical heterogeneity, the same evidence of the divided soul. It was fortunate that Arnold turned his gifts to criticism: there his creative weakness became his strength, and his indecision was transformed into catholicity. The man who took refuge from his own romanticism in a reverence for the classical tradition was eminently fitted to appreciate excellence in either kind.

But Arnold's efforts as a poet to be classical were less fortunate. The early *Empedocles on Etna*, which is a very obvious transposition of his own romantic attitude into a slight classical setting, is a better poem than the later *Merope*, which is his

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attempt to be the complete Greek tragedian. Yet he refused to reprint *Empedocles on Etna* because it did not satisfy the Aristotelian canon that drama must be an imitation of actions. As though *Empedocles on Etna* were a drama at all ! Of his two attempts to apply on a miniature scale something of the classical method to non-classical subjects, *Balder Dead* is a complete and frigid failure. Not so with *Sohrab and Rustum*. That, it seems to me, is Arnold's finest and most original poem. In spite of its frankly Homeric similes—Arnold's impotence with metaphor is significant—and its purely Miltonic blank verse structure, it is a single whole—impressive, dignified, and deeply moving. In *Sohrab and Rustum*, as so often in Arnold's poetry, we can recognise the elements and assign them to their sources ; we feel that his borrowings are borrowings, we are fully aware how derivative the poem is ; yet it moves and delights us. And the prime cause of this success is that he for once acted instinctively in the spirit of the true classical canon, and chose a really significant human action for his theme. It is the more striking that his instinct should have failed him in *Merope* and *Balder Dead*. He seems to have lacked courage to a point at which he was unable to distinguish between an action which ought on some *a priori* grounds to be significant, and an action which he himself felt to be significant. The story of Sohrab and Rustum moved him ; and he moves us by his new creation of it. The stories of Merope and Balder Dead left him cold;

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and the poems leave us cold. "No man," he wrote in the long and tedious preface to *Merope* itself, "can do his best with a subject which does not penetrate him: no man can be penetrated by a subject which he does not conceive independently." That is true; but a poet needs the full courage of himself no less when he seeks the safety of the classical method than when he claims for himself romantic liberty. He must have the courage to choose a theme, not because it is like other themes which have proved impressive when conceived by far different minds and created by hands far different from his own, but because it makes an immediate and profound appeal to his instinctive nature. The story of Sohrab and Rustum is as real to the modern consciousness, of which Arnold was an inheritor, as it was to the Persian historian who recorded it. The reality of the story of *Merope* has passed with the passing of the Greek mind; the truth of the story of Balder has gone the desolate way of the Northern Gods.

Arnold's poetry is divided sharply according to the division which was in himself. On the one hand is his personal and romantic poetry; on the other, the impersonal and classical. The former is the more interesting, but one could scarcely call it the better poetry. Arnold's gait was too heavy for the lyric, and it was only for brief moments that he could move freely and lightly as he did through the whole of *The Forsaken Merman*. There are snatches of authentic lyric in the final song from *Empedocles on Etna*.

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Not here, O Apollo!
Are haunts meet for thee.
But, where Helicon breaks down
In cliff to the sea,

Where the moon-silver'd inlets
Send far the light voice
Up the still vale of Thisbe,
O speed and rejoice !

Yet even there the drag of the heavy foot becomes perceptible, and we feel the imminent menace of Arnold's deliberation.

His most consistent achievement was in the kind which we call elegiac. It suited best with his own persistent mood, of restrained regret for the life which he could not accept and the soul which he could not make his own. Moreover, in his elegiac poetry what Mr. Saintsbury has happily called "his elaborate assumption of the singing robe" was in keeping with a true and living literary tradition. For the tradition of elegiac poetry, settled once for all in England by the powerful genius of Milton, comes to us unbroken from classical times. In spirit it is not truly classical. The Alexandrian idyllists, Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus, with whom it began, belong to a decadence. That makes them only the more potent and natural influences in a non-classical epoch ; for they represent an attitude which was possible only at a time when the self-contained Greek universe was being disintegrated. Though they wrote in Greek,

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they are modern, and the tradition which takes its rise from them is one which is native to English poetry ; the tradition of classical Greek drama is alien to it.

Therefore, when Arnold followed Milton and Shelley and Keats, in *Thyrsis* and *The Scholar Gipsy*, he was not wasting himself in the hopeless task of trying to resuscitate a dead tradition and a forgotten consciousness. Not only was the mood of dignified melancholy peculiarly his own, but the manner of its expression had been organised into an English tradition by great poets before him. The elegiac tradition, we may fairly say, has become, in spite of its Alexandrian origins, a truly English tradition. It is the nearest thing we have to a definite poetic tradition at all. Matthew Arnold, fearful of leaning wholly upon himself, turned instinctively towards the congenial security it offered, and he achieved two minor triumphs in the kind. That they are very derivative is of no great consequence ; those who care for these things should perhaps find only an added delight in the many acts of recognition to which they are compelled. They will experience a curious and subtle pleasure in registering the debt which the famous lines of *The Scholar Gipsy*,

Far most, I know, thou lovest retired ground.
Thee, at the ferry, Oxford riders blithe,
Returning home on summer nights have met
Crossing the stripling Thames at Bab-lock-hithe,
Trailing in the cool stream thy fingers wet
As the slow punt swings round.

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owe to the yet more famous lines of Keats's *Ode to Autumn* :

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store ?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind. . . .

But these encounters only serve to sharpen the fine point of seldom pleasure; not to blunt it.

Matthew Arnold tired, however, even of elegy. For the one elegy towards which he would have been inexorably driven, had he continued in the vein, would have been an elegy upon himself, on the death of his own soul. Of that elegy there are only snatches and fragments ; sudden accents of grinding and empty misery.

Wandering between two worlds, one born
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.

Herein, for all his reticences and restraints, Arnold no less than the wildest romantic was the victim of his own self-deception. He transferred to the world without his own deep division of soul. But it was not the world that had failed, but he. The stream of poetry, of creative life, dwindled and died within him ; and he knew the cause. He declared it in *A Nameless Epitaph* :

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This sentence have I left behind:
An aching body, and a mind
Not wholly clear, nor wholly blind,
Too keen to rest, too weak to find,
Are God's worst portion to mankind.

[*November, 1923.*]

*English Prose in the
Nineteenth Century*

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It would be hard to find two little books full of better reading than these.¹ Unlike most anthologies, they are satisfying ; they are solid food, not *hors d'œuvre*. The highly spiced, artistic writing which usually is regarded by the anthologist as the only right English "prose" is here presented to us against a background of the normal prose achievement of the age. We are given a glimpse of the whole landscape, and are not confined to a few select parterres. We have a sense, therefore, of the whole movement of English prose during the nineteenth century ; we see it gradually disengaging itself from the grandiose gesture of Johnson and Gibbon ; we watch the slow decay of the historical writing for which Gibbon established the idiom, and the slow growth of the power of the novelist, who for the purpose of exactly recording his clear imaginations becomes bolder and bolder in his effort to squeeze the stiffness and the rhetoric out of his language. And the struggle is the more thrilling because its details are obscure and its causes to no small degree economic.

Generalisation in literary criticism is as rash as it is in life, and just as necessary. The fact that we can discern a dozen exceptions will not deter us from regarding the history of English prose in

¹ *English Prose*. Chosen and arranged by W. Peacock. Volume IV., Landor to Holmes; Volume V., Mrs. Gaskell to Henry James. Milford.

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the nineteenth century as in the main the history of the struggle of the novelist for suppleness and plasticity against the rhetorical tradition of the historian and the orator. That is the principal issue. At the beginning of the century the historical writer was the grave and reverend signior of literature, and the novelist at best a poor relation. Scott, by a happy stroke of genius or natural inclination, managed to carry the dignity of the historical writer into his fictions; but the rest of the novelists were very small beer on the palate of contemporary opinion. Reading novels, as *Northanger Abbey* shows us, was an indulgence like going to the cinema to-day. You confessed it with shame and felt bound by a kind of Freemasonry to a fellow-sinner. In *Cranford* Miss Jenkyns sternly rebukes poor Captain Brown for his admiration of *The Pickwick Papers*. She doesn't think "they are by any means equal to Dr. Johnson," and after listening resignedly to the boiled mutton "swarry" at Bath, deals him a majestic *coup de grâce* by reading some of Imlac's conversations from *Rasselas*. The odd thing, to our modern sense, is that it took the novelist himself a long while to be sure of the independent dignity of his own profession and his right to handle prose to suit his own designs. Even in Dickens the uncertainty is sometimes apparent, in Thackeray more often, while in George Eliot it was a positive disease. The liveliness of her dialogue is at civil war with the heaviness of her description, which even at its finest and most impressive is discordant with the substance of her

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narrative. She seems never to have been convinced that a proper dignity could be achieved by vivid presentation alone. And this curious heresy, a product of the divided mind, persists even to-day. Critics still deny imagination to novelists who do not write "imaginatively," and novelists (like Mr. Wells) do not believe in their own seriousness unless they make their characters talk seriously on serious themes.

Meanwhile, in the tradition of historical writing itself, revolutionary forces were at work. On a long view, both Macaulay and Carlyle represent the incursion of the imaginative realisation of the novelist into the dignified kingdom of history, the counter-move to that penetration of fiction by the dignity of history of which Scott was the hero. It is the storming of the Bastille. No wonder Macaulay was popular. *London in 1685* is as good as, is even better than, a fine historical novel; and perhaps, if we look at the realities and not the labels, it is only the setting for one of the finest. Carlyle applies his sheer integrity of imagination to re-creating the smallest of my Lord-General's battles, and, for all his seeming rhetoric, has gone much farther than Macaulay in eliminating the vague emptiness of phrase (which is the real vice of rhetoric) from his language. But both of them were in rebellion against the old set-piece of the historian, such as Milman's account of the burning of the Temple:

It was an appalling spectacle to the Roman—

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what was it to the Jew ? The whole summit of the hill which commanded the city blazed like a volcano. One after another the buildings fell in with a tremendous crash, and were swallowed up in the fiery abyss. The roofs of cedar were like sheets of flame; the gilded pinnacles shone like stripes of red light; the gate towers sent up tall columns of flame and smoke. The neighbouring hills were lighted up; and dark groups of people were seen watching in horrible anxiety the progress of the destruction: the walls and heights of the upper city were crowded with faces, some pale with the agony of despair, others scowling unavailing vengeance. . . .

All who have been through the mill of a classical education are familiar with it ; it is “ the piece for Latin prose ” ; it reads, as all such pieces do, like an eloquent translation. But how much real imaginative vision does it contain ? To the sceptical critic it is arranged as carefully and as artificially as a *corps de ballet*. We might call it the conflagration piece, because we know it would do equally well and equally ill for any burning of a city in history.

To ascribe writing of this kind to Latin influence is scarcely fair to the Romans. It would not, indeed, have been written without them, and it is quite as good as a passage from a second-rate Roman historian ; but its mechanism is more important than its Latinity. It has dignity without substance, and whether the dignity is Roman or not is of small

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account. Latinity would not have prevented Milman from doing better had his mind been better. He is vaguely impressive, and that is all. But when Carlyle stands in front of the Bastille he has thoughts and feelings of his own. He also heard a howl of indignation; but it meant something to him; it had its place and value in a vision of things.

Hast thou considered how each man's heart is so tremendously responsive to the hearts of all men ; hast thou noted how omnipotent is the very sound of many men ? How their shriek of indignation palsies the strong soul ; their howl of contumely withers with unfelt pangs ? . . . Great is the combined voice of men ; the utterance of their *instincts*, which are truer than their thoughts ; it is the greatest a man encounters, among the sounds and shadows which make up this World of Time. He who can resist that has his footing somewhere *beyond* Time. Delaunay could not do it.

Moralising, some may say. Perhaps ; but what volume and resonance it gives to the clamour of the crowd, as it were an endorsement from eternity ! We feel that we have heard one of the great cries of history.

“Prose” ? There is no “prose.” There is only the complete and coherent utterance of a man who feels and sees and thinks clearly and is convinced that his feeling and vision and thought is worth utterance. It is that which holds us.

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Dickens sees Mrs. Gamp and Betsy Prig, Henry James sees Daisy Miller, Charles Reade watches the struggle of Denys and Gerard with the bear, Hazlitt is excited over the fight between the Gasman and Neate, Mrs. Gaskell knows her Cranford—

Their dress is very independent of fashion as they observe, “What does it signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?” And if they go from home, their reason is equally cogent : “What does it signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?”

—and the result is, though not the same, of the same kind in all—a sudden sense of revelation, of a significance hitherto unseen made plain. It is this constant effort of the individual vision, the individual conviction, to make itself visible and felt through the constraining garment of language which makes the reading of these little encyclopædias of English prose so exciting. The thing takes shape before our eyes; out of a vague confusion of sounds a clear melody slowly emerges, and to compensate in a measure for the lack of volume towards the end of the century there is a new delicacy, an unfamiliar subtlety. How much insecurity and fumbling had gone before when Henry James at last produced that perfectly clear and enchanting profile of Daisy Miller? What were the elements out of which Walter Pater suddenly produced the wholly new music—“She is older than the rocks among which she sits ; like

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the vampire, she has been dead many times and learned the secrets of the grave"—which so justly thrilled the ears of eager youth a whole generation ago?

The point in which these anthologies differ, and differ gloriously, from most prose anthologies is that they treat the novelist with the respect that is his due. For some strange reason, the composition of "prose" is generally supposed to be the privilege of the essayist. As we have said, the novelist himself has sometimes accepted the superstition, and it was with something of M. Jourdain's surprise that, somewhere about the middle of the last century, he discovered that he had been writing prose all along. But the superstition dies hard, and we can find traces of it even in these catholic volumes, in which Stevenson is represented (as ever) by *Aes Triplex* from *Virginibus Puerisque*, whereas *Treasure Island* is full of better prose than that. There is, as Henry James so exquisitely said, always "the tinkle of the supererogatory sword" to be heard in Stevenson's language. It is part of the man, and we love him and his work for it; but precisely in *Aes Triplex* the tinkle becomes almost a rattle, the manner a mannerism.

But the last thing to do is to quarrel with an anthologist who has done his work with such real critical originality as Mr. Peacock. The point with regard to Stevenson arises merely because we believe that the best writing in the early part of the nineteenth century was done on the whole by the essayists, and in the latter half by the novelists.

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To this generalisation, again, it is easy to discover exceptions; nevertheless, it is roughly true. And the principal cause of this is the continual increase in the vitality of the novel as a literary form during the century. In spite of poets, historians, and essayists, it is pre-eminently the century of the novel. Had they been born fifty years later, Hazlitt and De Quincey, yes, and even the incomparable Elia, would have found the sheer force of attraction of the novel irresistible. But when they flourished, the limited audience to which a writer could appeal was more ready to absorb history and essays and poetry than the still despised fiction. With the opening up of the democratic demand the novel was established, and, like the drama in Elizabethan days, it began to drain nearly all the creative vitality of literature into itself. The essay, which is so various and full-blooded at the beginning of the century, begins to look like a pale ghost at the end; and history, which had fairly belonged to the province of the creative writer, passes into the grip of the specialist. Indeed, our present condition is such that we wonder where, unless they had put on the disguise of fiction, many of the finest pieces of writing in these volumes would to-day find an editor. There seems to be, from the practical point of view of the literary agent, absolutely no place for them.

We might fairly talk, nowadays, of the tyranny of the novel ; and, if we looked behind that, we should probably discover the tyranny of the women subscribers to the libraries. Yet it would be not

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only unprofitable, but also ungenerous, to complain. The enormous vogue of the novel, if it has confined literature, has also helped to keep it alive. We may deplore that Mr. Hardy was prevented by it from giving us more of his poetry in his years of maturity, or that Gissing (whom we are rather surprised to find altogether absent from these volumes) should have been denied by it the pleasure of writing the scholarly essays to which his talent was suited ; nevertheless, in spite of this waste, we have to remember that it was no small thing that a literary *genre* should have been established by which it was possible for a writer to earn a competence without losing his self-respect. The vast audience of novel-readers has at least helped to abolish Grub-street ; and if, as seems possible, it will begin to enlarge its interests, the stream of English prose which has been narrowed perforce will expand again. At present a great deal goes into the novel which would be much better out of it. But the optimist will interpret such signs as the popularity of Mr. Wells's *History of the World*, of Mr. Lytton Strachey's essays in biography, and of books of collected short stories as indicating that the middle of the present century will find prose once more as various as it was in the middle of the last, and a good deal more self-supporting.

[August, 1922.]

Coriolanus

Coriolanus

CRITICISM is oddly undecided about *Coriolanus*. It is because *Coriolanus* is the most neglected of Shakespeare's greater plays? Or is the play neglected because of the indecision it provokes? The divergence of opinion about it is extraordinary. Mr. Lytton Strachey, for instance, has lately declared that "rhetoric, enormously magnificent and extraordinarily elaborate, is the beginning and the middle and the end of *Coriolanus*. The hero is not a human being at all." Mr. Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, puts *Coriolanus* with Faulconbridge as "admirable descriptions of instinctive temperaments," and says, with intelligible paradox, that "the play of *Coriolanus* is the greatest of Shakespeare's comedies." Mr. T. S. Eliot lately maintained that *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare's "most perfect work of art."

Divergence of this kind does not in the least resemble the recent controversy as to whether *Hamlet* is an æsthetic success or an æsthetic failure. All the world, and not least those particular disputants, is agreed that *Hamlet* is a mighty work; its precise degree of perfection alone is in debate: its greatness is admitted. Quite otherwise with *Coriolanus*. Nobody seems quite certain if it is a great play or not, and it is so seldom performed that there is no consensus of popular opinion as to its dramatic merits. The reason why it is so seldom

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performed is that the theme is unsympathetic to the ordinary man, who cannot accept as a tragic hero one whose ungovernable pride forces him to become a renegade. It is to this instinctive sentiment that Mr. Shaw gives paradoxical expression when he says that *Coriolanus* is the greatest of Shakespeare's comedies. *Coriolanus* is human enough, but he is so human that we are angry with him for not behaving more sensibly ; we do not feel that his conduct is inevitable, like Othello's; we prefer to say that it is life-like. By one burst of temper he exiles himself from Rome, by a second he kills himself. Nothing is changed in him—as he was at the beginning of the play so he is at the end. Whereas a tragic hero *deserves* to die, *Coriolanus* does not. A hero of great Shakespearian tragedy deserves to die because we cannot conceive him continuing to live.¹ But the death of *Coriolanus* is a shock to us ; we are not surprised that Shakespeare scamped it and, by making Aufidius repent it on the instant, turned it into an accident. To put the matter irreverently, *Coriolanus* is a big schoolboy ; Molière might have disposed of him better than Shakespeare.

Still, not even Molière could have made him live as Shakespeare has. To say, as Mr. Strachey says, that he is not a human being at all, is indeed astonishing. He is, of course, a human being of a quite different kind from the heroes of the great tragedies ; but he is more of the human being than

¹ And I would now add, the heroine of a great tragedy like Mr. Shaw's *Saint Joan*.

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they. Compared with Antony, it is true, he is almost thin-blooded ; but who is not thin and unsubstantial compared to that king of men ? In his own play and his own setting, Coriolanus is absolutely convincing. He is not so complete a man as Antony ; he inhabits a sphere of more primitive development, but within that sphere he is fixed as solid as a rock. Coriolanus is Shakespeare's Homeric hero ; and it is largely because of the completeness with which he is presented that his tragic end becomes perfunctory. That such a man should meet with a violent end is too natural to be inevitable ; his death is a physical rather than a spiritual consummation. To give it a spiritual significance Shakespeare needed to employ another Iago, to arrange the toils into which the instinctive man must fall. But there was no Iago in the story. It is true he might have made Aufidius into one. At the beginning, indeed, he seems to have intended to. Aufidius's speech at the end of the first act :

Mine emulation

Hath not that honour in't it had, for where
I thought to crush him in an equal force,
True sword to sword. I'll potch at him some way
Or wrath or craft may get him—

begins to put an Iago before us ; but Shakespeare could not hold him to his task. Aufidius also, at the critical moment becomes the instinctive Homeric hero. When Coriolanus appeals to him at Antium,

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he reveals himself as Coriolanus's blood-brother, incapable of treasons, stratagems, or spoils ; and there he is so fully presented that the faint-hearted indications of his subsequent designs have no power to change the figure before us. We feel that he acts in a rage of sudden jealousy, in a burst of temper, like Coriolanus himself. "My rage is gone," he says, "and I am struck with sorrow." That is true of the Aufidius Shakespeare has actually given us ; it is not true of the Aufidius he began by giving us. Aufidius-Iago might have made Coriolanus's death inevitable ; the Aufidius we have makes it an accident.

Aufidius is the weak point of the play. Dramatically, his function was to play in the second part of the drama the *rôle* held by Sicinius and Brutus, the Tribunes, in the first, but to play it with more steadiness of hatred even than they, because Aufidius has to compass Coriolanus's death, while the Tribunes need only his exile. But whereas the Tribunes play their part to the life, and we know and follow and comprehend their every move in entangling Coriolanus in his own weakness, Aufidius is as impulsive as Coriolanus himself, and as evidently incapable of plotting as he. Instead of being plainer to us than Sicinius and Brutus, he becomes ten times more shadowy.

But Coriolanus is magnificent, and in so far as he is the play, the play is magnificent also. He is Plato's man of impulse to the life. When his wounds are mentioned we see the schoolboy blush, with more of vanity than true modesty in it, come

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to his face. He cannot remember the name of the man of Corioli for whose freedom he begs. "Marcius, his name?" asks Lartius.

'By Jupiter, forgot !
I am weary; yea, my memory is tired.
Have we no wine here ?

Was the physical man ever more swiftly presented ? Coriolanus knows nothing of himself. His consciousness, his memory, his purpose—these are all in the keeping of his mother, Volumnia, or Menenius. His mind is sharp and his eye clear only on the battlefield. When he turns away from it, he is bewildered and lost in a strange country. He cannot notice things or people ; he barely recognises the wife whom he loves. The idea that he should behave in the city with the same circumspection with which he orders a battle or takes in a town is quite incomprehensible to him ; when his mother suggests it, he cannot understand. It is Volumnia, not he, who has the Consulship in mind when he returns victorious ; for plans beyond the battlefield his mind is in abeyance. He does what he is told, like a reluctant child, and, after the fatal outburst of his anger against the citizens, he is hopeless and pathetic ; he feels his mother has deserted him.

I muse my mother
Does not approve me further, who was wont
To call them woollen vassals.

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And he returns, after much persuasion, to make amends like a child, repeating the key-word of his conduct in case he should forget it. "The word is mildly." Past and future have no existence for him. He remembers only what he feels, the burning glow of an insult that has not been revenged; and not till he sees his mother and his wife before him has he an inkling that he is committing an act of shame in threatening his own city, Rome, with fire and sword. Till that moment Rome is no more than the source of his insult. At the last, with one of those amazing strokes of whose sheer simplicity lesser writers are ever afraid, Shakespeare makes him turn on Aufidius.

Auf. : Name not the God, thou boy of tears !

Cor. : Ha !

Auf. : No more.

Cor. : Measureless liar, thou hast made my heart

Too great for what contains it. Boy ! O slave !

Pardon me, lords, 'tis the first time that ever I was forced to scold.

The first time ! It is hopeless. Coriolanus is lost in life.

Seeing how marvellously Coriolanus is put before us, it is hard to understand the difficulty which has been felt by many critics concerning Coriolanus's conduct in advancing against his native city. It is apparently felt that his renegade act needs more explanation than Shakespeare has given; and Mr.

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Case, the editor of the "Arden" text, quotes, in his excellent introduction, Mr. A. C. Bradley's words:

As I have remarked, Shakespeare does not exhibit to us the change of mind which issues in this frightful purpose ; but from what we see and hear, we can tell how he imagined it ; and the key lies in that idea of *burning* Rome. As time passes, and no suggestion of recall reaches Coriolanus, and he learns what it is to be a solitary, homeless exile, his heart hardens, his pride swells to a mountainous bulk, and the wound in it becomes a fire. The fellow-patriots from whom he parted lovingly now appear to him ingrates and dastards, scarcely better than the loathsome mob. Somehow, he knows not how, even his mother and wife have deserted him. He has become nothing to Rome, and Rome shall hear nothing from him. Here in solitude he can find no relief in a storm of words; but gradually the blind intolerable chaos of resentment conceives and gives birth to a vision, not merely of battle and indiscriminate slaughter, but of the whole city one tower of flame. To see that with his bodily eye would satisfy his soul ; and the way to the sight is through the Volscians. . . . This is Shakespeare's idea, not Plutarch's. In Plutarch there is not a syllable about the burning of Rome.

Yet, with all deference to so great an authority, we cannot help feeling that this is Mr. Bradley's idea,

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not Shakespeare's. Certainly, there is a good deal of talk about the burning of Rome. The Tribunes and Menenius take it for granted ; Cominius reports that Coriolanus's eye is " red as he would burn Rome." But our impression is not that it is particularly insisted on : it recurs merely, and we also, like the Tribunes and Menenius, take it for granted. Coriolanus intends revenge.

Mr. Bradley is trying to circumvent the difficulty of Coriolanus's monstrous purpose. He does not leave Rome vowing revenge ; he seems to agree with Cominius that he may be recalled. " I shall be loved," he says, " when I am lacked." Yet, when he reappears, he reappears as the renegade whose fixed purpose is the destruction of Rome. All this is true. But what of it ? Shakespeare's Coriolanus sees neither before nor after. He is ignorant of his own nature as a savage. How should the man who cried at the last moment of his life : " 'Tis the first time that I was ever forced to scold," know the hidden workings of his own heart ? His purposes loom on him only when they are being accomplished. And surely Shakespeare has taken care that we shall understand him, without our being compelled to invent processes of mind for him ; surely, the vital words are the last which Coriolanus speaks to his mother, wife, and friends when he leaves the gates of Rome.

While I remain above the ground you shall
Hear from me still, and never of me aught
But what is like me formerly.

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Is not that tragic irony of the highest kind ? The monstrous thing that Coriolanus is to do is " like him formerly." He who knows nothing of himself may mean it as Menenius understood it, " That's worthily " ; but we, who have watched his blind, angry blundering bring to naught the considered purposes his friends have fixed upon him, know that the former self, like which he will remain, is a thing of impulse only, of pride and anger and resentment and courage. The Tribunes provoked him and he tried to kill them ; Rome has provoked him and he will try to kill it. We know ; he does not ; and he is far more surprised than we are to find himself entering Antium. His brief soliloquy—his only one in the play—gives us the exact measure and quality of his surprise. " O world, thy slippery turns ! " It seems to him odd and strange that he should be seeking out Aufidius.

So, fellest foes
Whose passions and whose plots have broke their
sleep
To take the one the other, by some chance,
Some trick not worth an egg, shall grow dear
friends
And interjoin their issues.

The incredible change in his actions is to him just the result of " some trick not worth an egg." He cannot understand it ; he can see no more of himself than his actions ; and when, confronted

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with Aufidius, he finds that his action needs some explanation, he instinctively reshapes the immediate past to his purpose. The friends who have tried to protect him and to prevent his suicide, who have offered to share his exile, suddenly become "the dastard nobles who have all forsook me." True, that is in Plutarch. But what Shakespeare has done is what Plutarch could never do—to put before us the living man whose thought and words were ever the servants of his impulses alone. Shakespeare has omitted all that Plutarch says about Coriolanus's calculations and plans.

Whereupon, he thought it his best waye, first to stirre up the Volsces against them (the Romans) knowing they were yet able enough in strength and riches to encounter them, notwithstanding their former losses they had receyved not long before and that their power was not so much impaired, as their malice and desire was increased, to be revenged of the Romaines.

Shakespeare takes all such calculation away from Coriolanus. Instinct sends him to Aufidius : in that he is "like himself formerly." "Like himself formerly," he suddenly yields to his mother and wife ; "like himself formerly," he dies.

Coriolanus is the drama, and since he is perfectly presented, the drama is all but perfect. But the

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weakness of Aufidius remains, and we cannot help speculating how Shakespeare came to fumble with him. Perhaps we may suggest the cause. In Plutarch's story, Aufidius appears on the scene only after Coriolanus has been exiled. We imagine that when Shakespeare first read through the story in North and shaped it as a drama in his mind, he had a clear conception of the part Aufidius was to play as the man of hate and conspiracy. When he came to write the play, with his eyes fixed even more closely upon North's book than they had been during the writing of *Antony and Cleopatra* a year before, he followed his own conception of Aufidius during the first act. There was nothing in North to change it ; Aufidius simply did not appear. But when he reached Coriolanus's exile, and Aufidius made his entry into North, he found a different Aufidius from the one he had conceived. Instead of a man poisoned by jealousy, he found a chivalrous enemy—"a man of great minde." Plutarch's Aufidius is said, indeed, to hate Coriolanus ; but it is the hate of one enemy for another ; and there is something sportsmanlike, schoolboyish even in their rivalry. "Many times in battels where they met, they were ever at the encounter one against another, like lusty coragious youths, striving in all emulation of honour." To this suggestion Shakespeare unconsciously succumbed, at a moment when he was following North's language more closely than ever. He forgot the Aufidius he had presented two long acts ago, the Aufidius who had declared his nature thus :

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My valour's poison'd
With only suffering stain by him
Where I find him, were it
At home upon my brother's guard, even there
Against the hospitable canon, would I
Wash my fierce hand in's heart. . . .

Instead of this, Aufidius now becomes Coriolanus's impulsive counterpart. Shakespeare gives him a magnificent speech:

Know thou first
I loved the maid I married; never man
Sigh'd truer breath ; but that I see thee here
Thou noble thing! more dances my rapt heart
Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
Bestride my threshold.

There is no hint of Aufidius's wonderful words in North. But Shakespeare could not resist North's suggestion of "the emulation of honour." The noble rivalry still exists. And yet, when he first presented Aufidius, he had used that very phrase to show that Aufidius's nobility was a thing of the past. "Mine emulation hath not that honour in't it had." But the temptation was too great. Back comes all the honour to Aufidius's emulation. We are given a moving and magnificent scene. But the two Aufidiuses can never now be reconciled. The poisoned plotter has to carry on the action of the play to its tragic end ; but it is the generous opponent who lives in our minds, the man who

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could no more have suborned assassins to murder Coriolanus than he could have resisted Coriolanus's swift appeal : "Pray you, Stand to me in this cause!" All through the fifth act we feel that Shakespeare does not know what to do with Aufidius, and in the final scene the conflict of the two characters who bear one name is manifest and unresolved. Aufidius has deliberately plotted Coriolanus's murder, and played even more cold-bloodedly than the Tribunes upon his temper to sting him to an outburst. Suddenly he changes parts again. He becomes the chivalrous enemy.

My rage is gone,
And I am struck with sorrow.

To some, perhaps, this attempted analysis of the actual working of Shakespeare's mind in the construction of *Coriolanus* from the material of North's story may appear fanciful ; but I believe it gives a coherent psychological explanation of the radical duality in the conception of Aufidius, which has been noticed by many critics before me. As Mr. Case puts it,

On the whole, Aufidius can be understood as well as despised ; but the delineation of the character does not satisfy, and leaves the impression of an unpleasing task, accomplished with as little trouble as possible. It is in contrast with the careful presentation of the Tribunes.

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But it is impossible to leave it at that. At one moment, at least, Shakespeare spent all the force of his poetic genius on putting an heroic Aufidius before us, in his speech to Coriolanus; and Shakespeare was not in the habit of shrinking from "unpleasant tasks" (in Mr. Case's sense of "unpleasant," anyhow): he did not flinch from Iago. When we remember that two acts and a half intervene between the first presentation of Aufidius's character and his reappearance ; that at the time of his reappearance Shakespeare was working with his eyes glued to the book ; and that the phrase "emulation of honour" had been as it were a key-word that stuck in his brain from his first reading of North—then, we believe, it becomes clear that under the immediate influence of North, Shakespeare reverted to a conception of Aufidius which had really been dismissed to the past by Aufidius's speech in Act I., sc. 10, and which was inconsistent with his original idea of the dramatic action of the play. Then, perhaps, we may value Aufidius's speech in Act IV., sc. 5, as something more than the most splendid piece of poetry in a play full of splendid poetry—as a precise indication of when and how and for what cause Shakespeare's human instincts triumphed over his artistic purposes.

Of the other characters, there is little that is new to be said. But there is a correspondence in the play which seems to have escaped attention, though it reveals the subtlety of Shakespeare's characterisation. At the very beginning of the first scene he suggests the strange relation between

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Coriolanus and his mother. "Though soft-conscienced men," says the First Citizen, "can be content to say it was for his country, *he did it to please his mother* and to be partly proud." We call this nowadays the Oedipus complex. But what is amazing is the way Shakespeare conveys that Coriolanus and Volumnia together are one being—Volumnia the mind and purpose, Coriolanus the body and strength. Hence the peculiar subtlety of his creation of Virgilia. There is really no place for her; if she is to be given at all, she must be given in a hundred words. Shakespeare does it with an instinctive gesture. But Virgilia is a being apart. The real and binding unity is between mother and son. And at the same moment Shakespeare makes them use the same phrase. When Coriolanus has been banished, Volumnia in a frenzy of rage waylays the Tribunes, and cries:

I would my son
Were in Arabia and thy tribe before him
His good sword in his hand.

When Coriolanus is at bay in Antium in the final scene, he also cries :

O that I had him
With six Aufidius and more, his tribe,
To use my lawful sword.

Whether the repetition was deliberate, calculated art, who can tell? It does not matter, for if it was

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not calculated, it is only one more proof of Shakespeare's astonishing instinctive realisation of a blood-bond of temper.

Finally, there are one or two points of textual interpretation upon which suggestions may be welcome. In Act I., sc. 4, l. 40, the Folio text runs thus :

Come on,
If you'l stand fast, we'l beat them to their wives
As they us to our trenches followes

Another alarum and Marcius followes them to gates, and is shut in.

It is important to note that this stage-direction is altered in the modern editions, where it appears as *Another alarum. The fight is renewed. The Volsces retire into Corioles, and Marcius follows them to the gates.* Whether the new direction is better is of no moment ; the point is that it is different. The real question at issue is whether Shakespeare wrote "As they us to our trenches followes." The rhythm is appalling in itself, and doubly appalling as the conclusion to a soldier's desperate appeal in battle. Nor is it improved, save in a purely mechanical sense, by reading "followèd." The dramatic force is frittered away by the rhythmical debility. The same incident is referred to a little further on by a Messenger ("I saw our party to their trenches *driven*"), and by Cominius ("Where is that slave which told me they had *bear* you to your trenches ?"). Nothing so weak as "followes"

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there. Is it conceivable that Shakespeare should have made the prime actor in the heat of battle use the flabby word ? At all events, no one will deny that—

Come on,
If you'l stand fast, we'l beat them to their wives
As they us to our trenches !

is better poetry, better Shakespeare, and better drama. Have we the right to improve the Folio ? If we take the Folio stage-direction, we find the suspect word in it. If we count spaces as letters, the distance from "As" to "followes" in the text is twenty-seven letters ; while the distance from "Another" to "followes" in the stage-direction is also twenty-seven letters. Surely the conclusion is that in the copy from which the play was set up "followes" came immediately after "trenches," but in the line below. The change of the stage-direction has concealed the process of the corruption.

When Cominius is celebrating Coriolanus's exploits in the Senate, he makes this stirring speech:

His sword, death's stamp,
Where it did marke, it took from face to foot :
He was a thing of blood, whose every motion
Was timed with dying cries; alone he entered
The mortal gate of the city which he painted
With shunless destiny; aidless came off,
And with a sudden reinforcement struck
Corioles like a planet.

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That is, at least, what the Folio makes him say. But Tyrwhitt conjectured that the first two lines should read :

His sword, death's stamp,
Where it did mark, it took: from face to foot
He was a thing of blood.

Since then, all the editors have followed Tyrwhitt. It may seem that a change in punctuation is trivial. But here the whole meaning of the passage is changed by it, and changed for the worse. For the crucial passage to elucidate this elaborate metaphor is Hamlet I., i. 162. "The nights are wholesome ; then no planets strike, No fairy takes." "Takes" is in its good Elizabethan sense of "infects." "Struck Corioles like a planet" shows that the metaphor is continued to the end. Coriolanus's sword infects "from face to foot." He is "a thing of blood," not in the sense that he was covered with blood, but like the Avenging Angel. The "shunless destiny" with which "he paints the mortal gate of the city" is a reminiscence of the plague-mark on the door of an infected house. And finally he "struck Corioles like a planet," because "planet-stricken" was the name for sudden death to which the doctors could assign no cause. The metaphor is splendidly sustained, and it is simply because Tyrwhitt did not recognise that "takes" bore the still familiar sense of vaccination "taking" that he altered the punctuation of the passage, and made it difficult for us to understand it.

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With less conviction, we offer a suggestion for the famous crux :

Fortunes blows
When most struck home, being gentle wounded,
 craves
A noble cunning.

Dr. Johnson explained it ingeniously. "The sense is : When Fortune strikes her hardest blows, to be wounded and yet continue calm requires a generous policy." Apart from the intolerably awkward syntax, the use of "gentle" is unparalleled ; and, after the straightforward lines that precede, the sudden tangle brings us up with an unpleasant jar. When Shakespeare overrides syntax, he usually makes his sense quite clear. Moreover, Coriolanus is quoting his mother's proverbs. The three before have the simplicity of proverbs ; this one is a riddle. We cannot believe that Shakespeare wrote the lines as they stand. The natural sense in the context is, "Fortune's blows when most struck home, being . . . crave a noble cunning." The three words beginning with "being" represent a phrase in apposition to, and explanatory of, "Fortune's blows when most struck home." We suggest, diffidently, that behind the meaningless "gentle" is concealed the adjective "tentles" (tentless, i.e., impossible to probe), and that the line originally read :

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When most struck home, being tentless wounds
do crave
A noble cunning.

They are wounds beyond the skill of the ordinary surgeon.

Shakespeare in this martial play was particularly fond of using the word "to tent" metaphorically, see i., 9, 31, and in particular iii., 1, 235. "'Tis a sore upon us you cannot tent yourself."

Of minor importance textually, but of some significance for the psychology of Coriolanus are two changes from the Folio made by all the editors. In iii., 1, 91, Coriolanus breaks out at Sicinius's word "shall remain."

Cor. : Shall remain !
Hear you this Triton of the minnows ? Mark
you
His absolute " shall " ?
Com. : 'Twas from the canon.
Cor. : " Shall ! "
O God ! but most unwise patricians : why
You grave but reckless senators. . . .

Theobald's change of "O God!" to "O good, but most unwise . . ." has been universally followed. The original sounds to me much more like Coriolanus. Further in ii., 2, 74, Coriolanus says to Brutus, the Tribune :

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You sooth'd not, therefore hurt not ; but your
people

I love them as they weigh—

Menenius : Pray, now, sit down !

For some inscrutable reason the dash of the Folio has been replaced by a full stop. Dashes to mark interruption are not so plentiful in the Folio that we can afford to throw them away. Menenius, as ever, tries to stop Coriolanus from his furious outburst. We could supply Coriolanus's unspoken words from this very play. Probably they were : “ That's lesser than a little ! ”

[*July, 1922.*

Flaubert and Flaubart

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ROMANTICISM is always with us, and probably it always has been. For, if romanticism is a significant phenomenon, as we feel instinctively it is, then the continual failure to define it suggests that it is an aboriginal appetite of the human soul, as primary and as elusive as love, or consciousness, or the soul itself. Instead of being angry with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, perhaps we ought to be grateful to him, for anticipating the work of the psycho-analysts and bringing the complex to the surface of the European consciousness. Fragments of it had no doubt emerged before. Calvin and Port-Royal, by dividing the Church on the extreme issue of original sin, had proved at least that a complete anti-romanticism was intolerable to the great majority of professing Christians. For romanticism, when defined in terms of Christian psychology, is anything short of an unwavering belief in original sin. Nevertheless, although Rousseau himself proclaimed the gospel of romanticism chiefly in terms of Christian thought, the appetite is too deep and too ancient to be thus confined.

Romanticism must certainly have existed before Christianity¹ took hold of the civilised world, just

¹ In this essay the term "Christianity" is used in the sense of the organised and formulated religion. I hold that there is a fundamental, and probably inevitable, opposition between the teaching of Christ and Christianity, between—to use Mark Rutherford's words—"the official, symbolic, ecclesiastical Christ" and "the real Galilean."

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as it has continued to exist when that hold has loosened. . And if we look, as we must, for a formula which will comprehend all its forms, we must give up hope of finding one so neat as that which Christian theology offers. The merit, and perhaps the *raison d'être*, of a closed system is that it permits of compact definition. But systems of religion and philosophy are only the formal and fashionable garments which the untidy reality of the human soul puts on for a season. If it manages to wear one longer, and the seasons become centuries, we find, if we look, that it is simply because so many patches and pockets have been added that little of the original design remains except the name. The soul insists upon being comfortable.

It may be that that very unheroic statement contains the largest quantity of truth. The soul is elastic. Bind it up tight, it will work loose somehow. Set it completely free, it will hurry into a convenient shell. It can live neither with nor without bonds, without (strictly) obligations. If this prosaic movement covers all manifestations of spiritual energy, then we can say that romanticism is the working loose from obligations that are felt to be hampering ; and every romanticism will be not only a reaction from an old formalism but the parent of a new one. For if romanticism is the feeling that we are better than our circumstances, it soon appears that the weightiest of these circumstances are fellow men who quickly catch the same feeling. Romanticism must end either in suicide or organisation. Organisation is, naturally, the

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more popular. So that, according as you are an optimist or a pessimist, you will describe the progress of humanity either as the taking off or as the putting on of one straight-waistcoat after another. The mere realist will be content to note that the curious process seems to have accelerated vastly.

So swift, indeed, does it appear to have been that we can almost discern an identity between the act of breaking out of one waistcoat and that of putting on another. Very, very few years elapsed between the proclamation of liberty and its organisation into nationalism and the industrial system at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and we are not surprised that the most modern political romantics simply promise us, in so many words, a perfect orgy of organisation.

But the paths of political and artistic romanticism are separate. They may use the same battle-cry, but they mean very different things by it. When the artist proclaims that "man is better than his circumstances," he means by man, himself; he is the type of humanity. When the democrat proclaims it, he means by man all men. Both propositions are doubtful.

What is interesting is that one proves to be in almost diametrical opposition to the other. If the artistic romantic believes that he is superior to his circumstances, he also believes in himself as an exceptional being. The faith that all men are exceptional beings is impossible to him. There would be no background for his own performance.

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In order to be lawless one needs laws; the ordinary alone can make the extraordinary possible. But the political romantic proclaims that all men are extraordinary, and proceeds to legislate for them as though they were all the same. In itself somewhat irrational, this method is peculiarly irritating to the artistic romantic, who believes that he anyhow is something out of the common. Hence the conflict that is for ever silently raging between democracy and art. We say art, simply, instead of romantic art, because the growth of democracy has driven all art to romanticism. A society which is based on the principle that all men are spiritually superior, abolishes spiritual superiority altogether, because a superiority which all men share is not a superiority at all. Against such a society the artist is inevitably in more or less open rebellion. These circumstances are the worst possible for him. No wonder that he believes himself superior to them.

Whether democracy killed the Christian religion, or the death of the Christian religion opened the way for democracy, need not be settled now. Probably it was the latter. The important thing is to see what a marvellous safety-valve for natural romanticism Christianity offered. It assured the ordinary man that he was indeed, as he believed, superior to his circumstances, and that at the same time it was a wicked and foolish waste of time for him to attempt to change his circumstances. Not here, not now, it said, and promised him a crown of glory in the world to come. Thus superbly, and not altogether in contradiction to the intention

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of its founder, it reconciled the necessary inequality of this world with the instinctive desire for equality. For many centuries it satisfied the natural romanticism of man. Nietzsche's indictment of Christianity as "a slave morality" was not very penetrating. It was indeed a morality for slaves, in that it made the slaves contented with their slavery. Now, that the slaves are deprived of its consolations, is anybody the better? What is the use of abolishing a slave morality unless you abolish slaves? Nietzsche made no attempt to do that; the very notion would have been abhorrent to him, artistic romantic as he was. Christianity was really an indispensable element in Nietzsche's ideal world of heroes. But he did not understand that; he did not see that if you take away the slave's banjo, he will take off his fetters. They have to be put on somebody, and the chances are heavy that they will be put upon the intelligent men first of all, Nietzsche himself to start with.

Christianity was, in fact, the last bulwark of the world against democracy. Not because Christianity is a particularly "intelligent" religion, but because it promises to satisfy all present discontents in the world to come. That valuable function of Christianity cannot be revived. Christianity defends the established order, no matter what that order is. It will defend plutocracy with the same good will as it once defended monarchy or aristocracy, simply because it is indifferent to the things that are. If the things that are are comparatively good things, then Christianity, humanely

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judged, is good ; if they are bad, it is bad. What more impregnable defence of the worst plutocracy could be devised than the simple sentence : "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God." The poor man's desire for revenge is utterly satisfied. Now he can watch with pleasure the capitalist adding million to million. The Federation of Employers should see that every tenement in England was gorged with copies of the New Testament.

Christianity is indeed a slave morality. But Nietzsche should have known that slaves must be. "The poor ye have always with you." The slaves are indistinguishable and everlasting. Civilisation depends upon the quality of the masters. And who are the masters once the doctrine of equality on this side of the grave has been introduced ? Those whom the slaves naturally respect. And whom do the slaves naturally respect ? Those who have the most money. For they see that money is a thing that is acquired not by intelligence, or bravery, or any quality not within their reach. They feel instinctively that money is inviolate, because it is a distinction they may hope to attain. In worshipping money, they worship a possible apotheosis of themselves.

Christianity can make plutocracy tolerable ; the lack of Christianity makes it desirable. It is the only form of society that the eternal slave can understand. It is also the one form of society which is utterly uncivilised. The slave cannot

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understand a civilised society, which works for ends which are beyond his comprehension. If he does comprehend them, he is no longer a slave, for he sees that men are not equal in gifts, and that the end of society is to enable the most highly gifted to live the completest lives and to realise the maximum of humane potentialities. The slave who comprehends this, or has a glimmering comprehension of it, is a being apart. In a civilised society he inevitably makes his way upward.

Political Romanticism, then, is the immediate result of the decline of Christianity. The instinctive belief of man that he is better than his circumstances is no longer satisfied by a promise of superiority in another world. It has, therefore, to be satisfied here and now ; and the only way that it can be satisfied is by establishing a criterion of superiority which has the assent of the greatest possible number of members of society—the test of money. Political romanticism leads direct to plutocracy. What comes after plutocracy, so far as we can see, is revolution and more plutocracy.

So in a sense political romanticism ends by giving a justification to artistic romanticism. In a plutocracy the feeblest artist has some excuse for regarding himself as superior to his conditions. In a manner often exaggerated and sometimes absurd he is vindicating the principle of spiritual superiority and defending the conception of the hero. He conceives himself as above the laws because the laws no longer make provision for the

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principle which he, however inadequately, represents. He cannot acknowledge himself a member of a society which has no place for him ; and he feels, if he cannot define, the equivocation which lies behind the invitation that he should take his place in it as a citizen. A man is a citizen of a commonwealth only when the commonwealth enables him to realise his own potentialities.

Thus the growth of political romanticism has intensified, and continues to intensify artistic romanticism. The artist is driven back into the stronghold of his own personality. There is, of course, no essential reason why he should not continue to be objective in his art. But objectivity requires from him a much greater effort than was necessary before. He no longer feels that his work has a true social function, so that the need of an obvious and immediate universality is not present to him. For the same reason, the spirit of comedy begins to wither, because there is no principle inherent in the society in which he lives to which he can refer its aberrations ; it is all aberration. And again the patient representation of reality is irksome, because the reality itself is alien to him, and if he turns to it, he turns to it with impatience and scorn.

This aggravation of artistic romanticism by the political romanticism which it helped to engender, is one of the most striking phenomena of the nineteenth century. It explains the curious paradox by which, at a time when civilisation has degenerated (or “progressed”) into a complex arrangement of

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material conveniences for the purpose of producing wealth, the artist has a far greater conviction of his own sacrosanctity than ever before in history. The modern artist is positively swollen-headed ; he is a perpetual hero to himself ; like Baudelaire's Dandy, he lives and sleeps in front of a mirror. And there is a good deal of excuse for him. A sense of self-importance is probably necessary to life, and if the importance is really illusory, the only obvious remedy to exaggerate one's belief in it. When nobody believes you are anything, the instinctive reply is to believe that you are everything. Against a society which has a function for the artist only in so far as he is a manufacturer of a profitable merchandise, it is scarcely surprising that the artist retorts that his is, in fact, the supreme function, and his position so exalted that it is invisible to the naked eye.

Well, some such conception may have its uses in keeping the artist going. But illusions are illusions, and they are dangerous. If it is a good thing that the artist should be kept going, it is not a good thing that he should be sent into a blind alley. The modern conception of the artist is worse than a blind alley; it is a road that leads to perdition.

What is the modern conception of the artist ? It is that he is a kind of superman. He speaks a language that is naturally and inevitably unintelligible to the general world, simply because the thoughts he thinks and the emotions he feels are extraordinary. He repudiates with disdain all

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obligations to be comprehensible. Having an ineradicable conviction that there is nobody who can comprehend him, he has come to believe that comprehensibility is in itself a sign of weakness and failure. What is original (he supposes) must necessarily be unintelligible. Originality and obscurity are synonymous for him; and since the desire of his heart is to be original, he shuns lucidity as he would the plague. He finds, moreover, a profound satisfaction in obscurity for its own sake, because it is an evident and unmistakable sign of his superiority to the profane vulgar. And he has a deep contempt for those members of his own craft who make some effort to be generally intelligible. Indeed, he is more contemptuous of these than he is of the uneducated mob. The reason seems to be that he regards them as traitors to the mystery and craft of Art. So that, to the observant stranger, the most obvious mark of the Artist is the vehemence and fury of his assertion that other people are not Artists.

The first thing to notice in this characteristic modern creed is that while proclaiming the infinite superiority of the artist, it absolves him entirely from the effort in which his superiority consists. The artist—we give him a small initial to distinguish him from the modern artist-Superman—is indeed, by hypothesis, an extraordinary person. But it is not sufficient for anybody to be an extraordinary person. Most people are, when you come to know them ; and the extremely extraordinary persons are shut up in prisons and asylums. What

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distinguishes the artist from these other extraordinary persons is his power to communicate his peculiar thoughts and emotions and perceptions to a considerable body of people. This considerable body of people is not very large, at the best ; there are relatively few people who are curious enough to desire to see life through other eyes than their own. Most prefer to read a book, or to look at a picture, in order to find a corroboration of their own habitual ways of thinking or feeling or even of dreaming. But there remains a considerable residue who have tasted the delight of having new thoughts and feelings and perceptions revealed to them, and are excited by the promise of happiness which the artist seems to hold out to them. These are the people to whom the artist addresses himself. He acknowledges a double obligation to himself and to them : to himself, not to falsify his peculiar thoughts and perceptions; to them to make the apprehension of those thoughts and perceptions as certain as possible. Indeed, the obligation is so strong and so profound, that his effort is to impose his thoughts and perceptions upon them, to make it impossible for them to refuse them. Only in so far as he succeeds in this task is the extraordinary person an artist at all. But the Artist is not merely relieved from the effort; he has to give a solemn undertaking when he is admitted to the mysterious company of Artists not to degrade himself by making it.

It is clear that such a singular and self-stultifying conception of the Artist cannot be very ancient. The Artists are, indeed, like people who propose

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to reform the morals of society by refusing to beget children; if they had their way purity would be perfect within a generation for the race would cease to exist. If all artists had been Artists, art would have deceased long ago.

The second thing to notice about the conception of the Artist is that it is a very modern invention, much younger than the steam-engine, only a little older than the telephone, and, like the telephone (we are tempted to add) it comes, at any rate in its last perfection, from America. But the origins are European enough. It began with Rousseau and romanticism, as we have seen. Rousseau did not know what seeds would fall upon the ground he so vigorously overturned. Nor was the first generation of literary romantics in the least a generation of Artists. Most of them were eager to convert the world. Byron moved Europe ; Chateaubriand moved France. Stendhal, though he made up his mind that he would not be read till 1880, put no difficulties at all in the way of people who wished to read him before that date. The struggle over Hugo's *Hernani* was comprehensible enough to set all Paris by the ears. If the first generation of literary romantics was eager to get "anywhere out of the world," it was also anxious to take the world with it. And on the whole it was fairly successful. The worst crime that can be urged against it—unless we call Romanticism itself a crime, and condemn the whole nineteenth century and ourselves—is that it consecrated the conception of the artist as the genius.

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In the next generation of romantics, when the consequences of political romanticism were beginning to be felt, a fresh nuance of disdain was added. The artist's eye no longer rolled "in a fine frenzy," his hair was no more shaken out to the wind. He was an immaculately dressed man of the world with a secret sorrow. He buttoned up his coat, thrust his hand like Napoleon between the buttons, and looked fixedly at the wilderness of industrialism before him. It was the time of Baudelaire's *Dandyisme*. The artist was something of a superman ; he had the superman's impassivity ; and he enjoyed making the bourgeois shudder : but he knew that the bourgeois in order to shudder would have to understand.

Nevertheless we are on the brink of the invention of Art. It came with Flaubert. Not that Flaubert can be made in the least responsible for it ; he knew no more than Rousseau the superstitious uses to which a private curb of his for riding his own ultra-romantic Pegasus would afterwards be put. Art was for him still the process by which he disciplined his own peculiar thoughts and perceptions into universal comprehensibility : and he made himself very comprehensible indeed. Knowing that he was a smaller person than men before him like Balzac and Hugo, he made an additional effort at lucidity. They could afford to leave something to chance, he could not ; and he did not. In this he was perhaps the most faithful artist that ever breathed. Had he been a bigger one, he would not have been able to be so devoted.

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But the mysterious and prodigious labours under which he groaned reached the ears of the general world. Flaubert wore a strait-waistcoat ; he fed on a diet of quill pens ; he was an alchemist ; nobody could ever, ever understand the things he did. Nobody — except the Artists. For the Artists had suddenly come into being. They were the people who understood Flaubert. Not what Flaubert wrote, of course, for Flaubert had left no shred of excuse why an intelligent person should not understand, and set his own value on, what he wrote. They were the people who understood the mysterious process by which Flaubert wrote what he had written. They knew the measurements of the strait-waistcoat, and the number of pens he ate for breakfast. They knew how it was done. They were the hierophants of Mumbo-Jumbo ; like Gerard de Nerval's lobster, they knew the secret, unlike him, they said aloud they knew it.

Which was very nice for them, seeing that quite a number of respectable people, who might otherwise have read Flaubert as they read Dickens or Hardy, enjoying what they like and not torturing themselves with what they don't, took the Flaubartians—for that is what we will call them now—at their word, and, being afraid of secrets, decided Flaubert was too deep for them. That was still nicer for the Flaubartians. The more people they could keep away from the shrine, and leave to kneel on the temple steps, the greater their own prestige; until with the lapse of years their prestige increased

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sufficiently for them to issue an edict proclaiming it *lèse-majesté* for any one to suggest that Flaubert was not the greatest writer who ever lived. Oddly enough, this edict was not proclaimed by Frenchmen in France, but by Americans and Englishmen in America and England. But in this again the Flaubartians showed their wisdom. It was to their advantage that Flaubart (to be for ever distinguished from Gustave Flaubert the novelist) should have delivered his oracles in a foreign tongue.

Not until Flaubert was dead could this cult be fully inaugurated, for Flaubert, being a straightforward man with a perfectly clear vision of his own relative importance, had a distressing habit of suspecting those who wanted to turn him into Flaubart. But once he was safely buried, the legend was begun. The story of the miracle was spread abroad and the ground near the grotto diligently bought up. A thriving trade in literary superstition was created. The Art of literature was a mystery ; no one could understand it who had not made his pilgrimage to the shrine. Real literature was incomprehensible ; if it was comprehensible, it was not real. Naturally, the man who was accustomed to go to literature for a life-giving delight, left Flaubart severely alone. He worshipped from afar. And if a spirit bolder than the rest took hold of Flaubert's works and declared that they were quite intelligible, that some were very fine and others were dull, the priests gathered round the shrine, shook their heads in pity, and said: "Ah, you see now what comes of not

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consulting us. He does not understand, and he has declared his folly to the world."

So the mystical creed of the perfect impenetrability of Art was established, and the secret society of Artists begun. And at the same time a parallel cult in painting was arranged, in the same fashion. Paul Cezanne happened to be a man very like Flaubert, a rather simple soul who had to impose a prodigious discipline upon himself in order to make his stiff fingers supple enough to produce a work that should be as lucid and "as solid as the art of the museums." For him, like Flaubert, it was a terrible effort to make himself comprehensible, to be faithful to what he saw, and at the same time to reveal to others what he had seen. By an exercise of the will, like Flaubert's, he triumphed like Flaubert. Among many failures, and as a result of them, he produced a number of pictures which are solid and individual and simple. He struggled for lucidity and he achieved it, and if you wish to know and enjoy the directness of the art at which he aimed you have only to go to the Camondo Collection at the Louvre and stand in front of the masterpiece called "La Maison du Pendu." And the Camondo Collection will do you this further service, if you are still oppressed by the intimidations of the *Cezannekult*, that it will help you to see how naturally the finest work of Cezanne takes its place among the finest work of Degas, of Renoir, of Camille Pissarro, yes, and of Sisley. Cezanne is perhaps the clumsiest of the great phalanx, but sometimes, by the sheer intensity

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which the effort to overcome it imposed upon him, he achieves a more piercing result even than they. But he is an equal in the company of equals.

But, of course, it is not the lucidity which Cezanne so painfully won which interests the Flaubartians of painting. They regard it as very reprehensible that Cezanne was lucid. They prefer to dazzle you with the obscure and experimental exercises he undertook in order to discipline himself ; and if you are courageous and insist that in his finished work all the obscurity has disappeared leaving something that you can enjoy with an intense delight, they will smile disdainfully and pretend that your enjoyment proves that you know nothing about it at all. Art is incomprehensible, they chant, save to us alone. If you think it is comprehensible, then you are a fool.

So in the last generation the worship of the heavenly twins has spread. Flaubert has been divinified into Tweedledum, Cezanne into Tweedle-dee. And they have done nothing whatever to deserve it. Both were faithful servants of art ; both were, indeed, heroes of art, for what was comparatively easy for others was terribly hard for them. Not born great, they achieved greatness ; but when they died greatness of another kind, which they would have been the first to disown, was thrust upon them. Men who had made themselves heroes by the agony of their efforts to conquer lucidity were made gods of incomprehensibility.

Since that time Flaubart has become a Moloch. Holocausts of promising artists have been sacrificed

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to him. A young writer or a young painter is crushed under the weight of an accumulated prestige, so that he no longer dares to make the effort to be comprehensible. By an astonishing extravagance of perversity he has been induced to believe that it is necessary that he should be incomprehensible. And the prestige of Flaubart is powerfully seconded by the attitude of romanticism into which the "civilisation" of the nineteenth century has forced him. He believes—and we have seen that it is largely true—that the artist is inevitably in rebellion against modern society. How can he more evidently behave as a rebel than by deliberately refusing to be intelligible even to that portion of society that may desire to understand him? Flaubart smiles upon his impulse, and watches him complacently as he rushes off to commit harakiri upon the altar, proclaiming the pre-eminence of art by annihilating it.

Nor is it surprising that this ju-ju should be practised with the most extravagant fury by inhabitants of the United States of America. In those states the materialism of modern "civilisation" has reached extremity. The romantic reaction against it is therefore also extreme. Flaubart appears in America as the saviour, for an act of homage to him is the only possibility of protest. Intelligent young Americans turn to Europe (many of them bodily) and seize with frenzy upon all that is most esoteric in the European practice of the new religion. They fling themselves into the cult of incomprehensibility with all the ardour of

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exasperated youth. They bow down to its prophets and worship them. And in their magazines they offer up prayers to Flaubart, of which this is one.

A barrel-organ monkey speaks. The children laugh.

But i don't, the crank goes round desperate elves
and hopeless gnomes and frantic fairies gush
clumsily from the battered box fattish and
mysterious the flowerstricken sunlight is thickening
dizzily is reeling gently the street and the
children and the monkey and the organ are
dancing slowly are tottering up and down in a
trembly mist of atrocious melody . . . tiniest
dead tunes crawl upon my face my hair is lousy
with mutilated singing microscopic things in
my ears scramble faintly tickling putrescent
atomies,

and

i feel

the jerk of the little string! the tiny smiling
shabby man is yelling over the music i under-
stand him i shove my round red hat back on my
head i sit up and blink at you with my solemn
eyeswhichneversmile.

That is a portion of a "poem" by Mr. Cummings which appeared in the *Dial* for April, 1922. The first noticeable thing about it is that Mr. Cummings is trying desperately to be incomprehensible, and he has considerable difficulty. He uses little "i's"

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for big ones, and abolishes stops, strictly in order to make himself unreadable. Still, he can be read. And he knows it. So he has to write two lines which are pure nonsense : "tiniest dead tunes, etc." The comprehensible part is commonplace.

But the Artist never admits that he is deliberately aiming at incomprehensibility. He will smile his superior smile when we point to his little "i's" for big ones ; and if he could be induced to descend to our level of stupidity (which he will never do) he would also say : "I have my reasons." It is useless for us to ask him what they are, because one of the first articles in the Flaubart creed is that "The Artist never explains his Art." Since he is condemned to silence, we must appoint one of ourselves to be his advocate. Let us listen to the affable *alter ego* of Cummings.

Artist's alter ego : i use i because i do not wish to insist upon my personality. In this poem i am not I. i am merely a sentience ; my personality is in abeyance.

The Mere Philistine : I understand. But has it never occurred to you that insistence and emphasis are relative ? In a normal conversation I attract attention equally whether I shout or whisper. The emphasis lies in departure from the norm.

A.A.E. : Surely you're not going to deny that i is smaller than I.

T.M.P. : Not at all. It is precisely because it is smaller that it is more emphatic.

A.A.E. : Why should i have a capital if i don't want it ?

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T.M.P. : There is no reason at all, if art consists in doing what you want to do. There is no reason why you should not always write your name, instead of Cummings, Sgnimmuc, if you like it better that way. But I understood that you desired to convey to some one that your personality was in abeyance, that you were on this occasion a passive consciousness invaded by sights and sounds.

C.A.E. : Well, what of it ?

T.M.P. : Only that you are going quite the wrong way about it. By writing i for I you are merely concentrating attention upon your personality. The letters of the alphabet are merely conventional symbols for sounds. They are useful precisely because they are fixed conventions. If you want to alter them, do so by all means, and accept the consequence that you write to be understood by yourself alone. You prefer the look of Sgnimmuc, then have it Sgnimmuc. But don't forget to pronounce it Cummings. Otherwise you will be in the awful position of having been compelled to change the sound of your name by a mere convention. Other people, of course, will call you Sgnimmuc (or perhaps, finding that awkward, something less recondite) but that won't matter to such a convinced individualist as yourself.

C.A.E. : But James Joyce does much worse things than that.

T.M.P. : Worse, perhaps. But nothing quite so stupid as changing I into i.

C.A.E. (*producing the Artist's Bible : Revised Version : "Ulysses," and turning over the pages*

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hurriedly) : Look at that. Isn't that worse than "eyeswhichneversmile" ?

T.M.P. (*looks at "Eglintoneyes looked up skybrightly"*): There is some sense in Joyce's method. I have no difficulty in understanding what he means and why he writes it in that fashion. He wants to give me the direct physical sensation of a peculiar glance given by John Eglinton. He wants to give me the sense of the bright swiftness of the glance from those skyblue eyes. I am not sure whether he succeeds. The real question to settle is whether the effort and delay involved by my having to separate and recognise the elements in "Eglintoneyes" and "skybrightly" in order to combine them is not so great as to nullify the impression of swiftness. I rather think it is : but I am doubtful, and since I am doubtful, the experiment is proved to have been worth making.

But you, my dear Sgnimmuc, are merely a fool when you write "eyeswhichneversmile." If you were trying (as you are not) to convey a sensation of swiftness, of a single act in its native wholeness, as Joyce was trying to do, you would still be a fool for employing such a device, for it is obvious in this case that the effort needed to disintegrate that word completely nullifies any effect of simultaneity which might be produced by writing it in one word. My apprehension of "eyes which never smile" is at least four times as swift as my apprehension of "eyeswhichneversmile." Unless I can separate the component words I cannot under-

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stand the phrase. The normal method of writing enables me to understand the phrase quite easily. If you still desire to give me an impression of simultaneity you may use the normal symbol and write "eyes-which-never-smile." That will remind you, dear Sgnimmuc, of "the-woman-who-did" and "the-boy-who-was-tired"; and that reminder will cause you pain,

S.A.E. : But look at this. (*Shows T.M.P. a page from "Ulysses," beginning :*

Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing.
Imperthn nthn thn nthn
Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.
Horrid! And gold flushed more
A husky fifenote blew.
Blew. Blue bloom is on the
Gold pinnacled hair
A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of
Castile.
Trilling, trilling: I dolores.
Peep! Who's in the . . . peep of gold ?)

What about that?

T.M.P. : Yes, I admit it's pretty bad. It seems to me utterly wrong-headed. But I know what Joyce is trying to do. Each one of those unintelligible phrases recurs in its proper context in the next pages of the narrative. They might be described, if I were charitable, as a kind of short-hand statement of the theme to be developed. But I am not charitable. I once spent twenty good

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minutes puzzling over that page, and I bear Joyce a grudge for it. So, without waiting to discuss whether such "a statement of theme" has in itself any value, I will say that it is a lunatic act to place it where it is. Where it is, it has not, and cannot possibly have any meaning.

S.A.E. : Do you mean to say Joyce is a fool ?

T.M.P. : Certainly a fool, but also a man of genius. I am afraid, my dear Sgnimmuc, you haven't that excuse for yourself. You try to be incomprehensible because you think you ought to be. Joyce is incomprehensible because he cannot help it. He is an egomaniac, the Rousseau *de nos jours*. All the aberrations of which we can see the beginnings in Jean-Jacques reach an extreme intensity in him. He is a contorted Laocoon in a death-struggle with the serpent of his inhibitions. He belongs to the most backward nation of the West, and he has been condemned to do for Ireland what Rousseau had to do for Europe. What was almost a natural gesture one hundred and fifty years ago, is an act of frenzy now. Rousseau was sane and tame compared to him. And just as Ireland itself is centuries behind the level of the European consciousness, Joyce is a man who has to leap a mile in a single stride. His effort is superhuman, and still he is not abreast. His strength is spent in liberating the world from inhibitions which it no longer feels. He has to achieve the evolution from Mediævalism to modernity in a night. Deep in him is the knowledge that he is the scapegoat of a race. No wonder he is an ego maniac. The

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“ purity ” of Irish women, the savagery of the Irish clans, the futility of Irish humour, the resentment of Ireland against an alien culture, the revolt of Ireland against a Church that has been European in every country of Europe but Ireland,—these are a few of the instincts that Joyce has had to satisfy by annihilating them in himself. He is the Voodoo man of San Domingo appointed Ambassador in Paris. He is the perfect cosmopolitan, and the perfect savage. *Qu'il est exotique!* Jean-Jacques only came from Savoy ; Joyce comes from the Hyperboreans. Jean-Jacques was the voice of his age ; Joyce is the voice of dead centuries. The history of Ireland in the last few years will have its place (a strange place) in the history of the world : *Ulysses* will have precisely the same place in the world’s literature.

I am afraid, my dear Sgnimmuc, that these considerations will bore you. They have so little to do with Art. But they should have some interest for you. You are an American. America is not so backward as Ireland ; it is not so old. But it has spent the hundred odd years of its life just like Ireland, in devouring the children of its womb. Your men of talent flee to Europe. But they do not belong to Europe, and they cannot become part of it, for they are in a fever of rebellion against constraints which were abolished for Europe long ago. Because they are conscious of their native Puritanism, they behave as the orgiasts of liberty ; the knowledge that they are aliens to European civilisation drives them to assume the

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airs of superculture ; and they call their self-lacerations Art. They rush into the service of Flaubart where they can vent their exasperations under the mask of superiority. Like the priests of Aricia they gain possession of the temple by slaying the priests before them ; and like the priests of Aricia they are a prey to perpetual fears lest another priest may come and murder them. They are the true outlaws of civilisation. They cannot rest in their own country, and they have no abiding place in any other.

I tell you, my dear Sgnimmuc, that Art is not European at all ; it is only the latest American invention. It is a patented device by which backward nations and backward individuals in any nation can procure themselves the illusion of having got abreast, ahead even, of a civilisation and a tradition which are not instinctive in them. If it were not that genius is a phenomenon independent of civilisation and tradition, Art would be as worthless spiritually as a vacuum cleaner. But genius is as possible in a backward nation as in a civilised one. By the device of Art genius will yield only a fraction of its true potentialities. Flaubart cannot kill genius, he can only deprive it of most of its value ; but he can murder a talent. I think he has come near to murdering yours, poor Sgnimmuc, for I can see little of it remaining. Good-bye.

[*April, 1922.*]

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